

Writing about Byzantium: The History of Niketas Choniates

Theresa Urbainczyk



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Writing About Byzantium

Niketas Choniates was in Constantinople when it was burnt and looted by the soldiers of the Fourth Crusade and he wrote a history which has always been the mainstay for anyone wishing to learn about the Comnene dynasty and the Byzantine Empire of the twelfth century. Yet it is a very difficult and puzzling text and, given its significance for the period, is understudied. The author says at the start that he wrote his work hoping that even workers and women would be able to profit from it, yet he wrote those words, and the rest of the history, in a highly convoluted, literary and at times opaque style and language.

This examination is an introduction to the history of Niketas, and to the author's views of why this period saw such catastrophe for the Byzantines. It looks at Niketas' thoughts about history-writing, the emperors, and the Comnene dynasty in particular, about the presence of God in man's affairs, and the historian's attitudes to the women of the imperial family.

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The *History* of Niketas Choniates

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1 The puzzle of the *History* of Niketas Choniates

Niketas Choniates is one of the most important Byzantine historians and yet, relatively speaking, he has not received the attention he deserves. He wrote about one of the most exciting, if tragic, periods of medieval history in an ornate and elevated style. One might expect him to be better studied simply because he described the effects on the Byzantine Empire of the Fourth Crusade. His narrative however is not only worth studying because of its significance to an important period of western medieval history. From the Byzantine perspective, 1204 was a catastrophe, and here we have an eyewitness account of the fall of the city. In 1204 Constantinople, the head of the Byzantine Empire, was captured by the troops of the Fourth Crusade whose aim was supposed to be the liberation of Jerusalem.¹ Constantinople had never been taken by any enemy in the nine centuries of its position as imperial city.² Niketas describes the period before, during and after this calamitous event.³

As Constantinople neared its end, Niketas extended his criticism to everyone for their role in its downfall, everyone who lived there, not so much the Crusaders, who are portrayed as barbarians but little more could be expected from them.⁴ They took advantage of the fatal and obvious weakness of the Byzantines.⁵ Niketas' focus, perhaps as Thucydides' main subject is the Athenians in his history, is on the Byzantines or rather Romans, as he calls the inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire.⁶ Both Thucydides and Niketas were patriots writing about the mistakes of their fellow citizens and trying to understand why the disaster happened.⁷ Towards the end Niketas has a striking aside. The last emperor before the fall of the city was Alexios Doukas, and of him Niketas says:

Inasmuch as the worst elements prevail among the Constantinopolitans (*for truth is dearer to me than my compatriots*), Doukas grew stronger and increased in power.

(564; my emphasis)⁸

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And the Greek makes clear what the English leaves ambivalent, which is that he values truth more than he values his compatriots: φιλτέρα γὰρ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ὁμογενεῖς ἢ ἀλήθεια. This phrase encapsulates what appears to have driven Niketas to write his history. He wanted above all to write the truth as he saw it, even though it meant criticizing his own people.⁹

Most readers would agree that Niketas wrote his history to understand the calamity that had struck his city, and most would agree that he laid the blame generally with the rulers and yet there is much that is puzzling about the work.¹⁰ Anthony Kaldellis started his article on Niketas titled ‘Paradox, Reversal and the Meaning of History’ with the following paragraph:

Those who wish to study Niketas Choniates as both a historian and a sophisticated writer face a formidable challenge. The mountain to be climbed is tall and steep and there are no ‘royal highways’ to the top. It is possible that no one has been there before. If the view promises to be spectacular, the ascent is sure to be treacherous. Niketas left no directions, despite the fact that he created something new, something that he knew would confound the expectations of even the most seasoned climbers. Any place where we might pause may collapse beneath our feet; there are pits and deep caverns everywhere; or else, his grottos may be so charming that, like Siren songs, they entice us to linger and give up the ascent. Likewise, we cannot afford to be dizzyed by the spiraling chasms of irony and paradox. We can take little for granted here. Where is the solid ground in Niketas Choniates’ *History*?¹¹

And he carries on:

I have no answer to that question.¹²

The rest of the article illustrates some of the difficulties of the text, such as the preface and the way that Andronikos is portrayed in the most negative manner, and yet when he is torn apart by the Constantinopolitan populace, Niketas turns against ‘the stupid and most ignorant inhabitants of Constantinople’.¹³ As Kaldellis points out, it is very difficult to see exactly what Niketas himself thought as one judgement may immediately be undercut by the following remark.¹⁴ He may describe an emperor in the blackest terms and then go on to praise him for extraordinary benefits he brought the empire. He narrated how Manuel framed one of his faithful subjects because he was envious of his abilities, and then says ‘A glorious deed was now performed by the emperor’ without appearing to be ironic since he describes how the cities of the East flourished under his rule (150). Or later, having described the random cruelty

of Andronikos, he comments ‘yet he did participate in many virtuous actions’ (323–325). What follows is a search for some solid ground in Niketas’ *History*.

The work is very sophisticated, using recondite vocabulary, and it is also difficult to read and to understand. It appears to be a classicizing history¹⁵ and yet the author most frequently cited is Homer, which to classicists seems odd, since this is a historical work.¹⁶ Another complication is that there were different versions of his history circulating.¹⁷ It appears that at first there was a history which would have been acceptable to the ruling emperor, but then once Constantinople fell, Niketas felt free to write as he wished, and the result was very different.¹⁸ One might attribute the apparently contradictory judgements as being the result of careless or rapid editing.¹⁹ But complexity seems to be part of the text.²⁰ The preface itself is one of the clearest examples of Niketas’ lack of clarity and will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Niketas’ life

The name Choniates comes from the place Chonai, modern Honaz/Khonaz – Colossae in the classical period, in Phrygia – southwestern Turkey, which is where he was from.²¹ He also had a prominent brother, Michael Choniates, bishop of Athens (1182–1204), who wrote letters and a monodia or lament when Niketas died.²² None of Niketas’ letters to him has survived and only one of Michael’s to Niketas remains, but there are bits and pieces of information in others.²³ Michael relates that the boys were educated in Constantinople as their parents were rich enough to send their sons to the capital for their education, although they are thought not to be from the aristocracy.²⁴ Niketas was born about 1155 and had a career as a bureaucrat, first as a sort of tax officer, then as imperial undersecretary; then he studied law, and afterward was appointed imperial secretary; by 1188–1189 was head of the public treasury. Although we know of his titles thanks to his brother Michael, it is not entirely clear what these positions entailed.²⁵

The high point of his career was his appointment of grand logothete in 1195, but he was removed from this pinnacle when the emperor changed, just two months before the fall of Constantinople in 1204.²⁶ Niketas tells the reader that he lost his job (565) and then describes how then with the sack of the city he also lost his home and property (587–595). He and his family went into exile first to Selymbria and then to Nicaea, after briefly returning to Constantinople and seeing the destruction of the artistic masterpieces by the barbarian army (635–636). From Michael’s funeral address we learn that Niketas died about 30 years after Michael became

bishop of Athens in 1182, so thus it must have been about 1215 or 1216 when he would have been 60 or 61.²⁷

His history

His history starts with the death of Alexios Komnenos in 1118 (Alexios I) and ends with events of 1207, so it carries on a little after the taking of the city. In the organization of his history he does not follow the classical Greek historians, but one might say he models his work on a writer like Tacitus, in that his history goes from emperor to emperor.²⁸ It could be argued that history-writing is dependent on whatever its focus is.²⁹ Thucydides, because he was writing about city-states, was able to keep his work about governments rather than individuals. The Roman historians in the imperial period tended much more towards biography because the power of the emperor was so great.³⁰ The *History* was largely about Niketas' own lifetime and where he goes further back, he acknowledges this. He says:

Since I was not an eyewitness of that which I have recorded [that is John's reign] I could not describe these events extensively but have set down what I heard from those contemporaries who personally knew the emperor and who escorted him on his campaigns against the enemy and accompanied him into battle.

(4)³¹

What follows is not an investigation into his sources. That is not to say this is not an important question, but my main aim here is to look at what Niketas does with his material, what impression he is trying to give the reader, and to examine the views he reveals in the work.³² Because it seemed to me that the work as a whole was intriguing, I wanted to examine it further. There is an excellent book recently published on Niketas by Alicia Simpson, which has already been referred to several times in this chapter.³³ Without this pioneering work, this book would have been very different. She has not only given the basic background to his work and describes the nature of his text, but has done invaluable research on the different versions of the history that the manuscript tradition bears witness to. This work in no way supersedes hers, but instead builds on the huge learning displayed in her book, to suggest a way of understanding Niketas that helps the reader approach this complex text. As will become apparent, there are many difficulties with this history. Andrea Catanzaro has recently produced an article, one might say trying to impose some *taxis* on the text.³⁴ What follows is the result of my own attempts to find a key to this challenging text. I came to this text as a classicist, and I am sure Byzantinists

will find much that is lacking in what follows. Nevertheless, it seemed to me that it would be fruitful for someone with a knowledge of the historiography of antiquity to examine this most learned and allusive history. For me, what soon became striking as I became better acquainted with the text was that, although superficially it owes much to classical learning, its more important model was the Old Testament, as one indeed might expect. One might also suggest that the many apparent paradoxes or puzzles in Niketas' work have a model too in the Bible itself.³⁵ Harry J. Magoulias published a translation in 1984 titled *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*.³⁶ This book is often singled out for criticism for mistakes in translation, however Magoulias did the scholarly community a service in making the text accessible to a much wider readership.³⁷ Plus it must be noted again that the text is very difficult to understand. Consequently the German translation by Franz Grabler and the Italian one by Anna Pontani have been consulted also.³⁸ However, unless stated otherwise, quotations will be based on Magoulias' and the references to Niketas' text from the van Dieten edition, as is conventional.³⁹ Magoulias, using van Dieten's apparatus, also provided a helpful introduction and notes indicating the echoes in the text. I have sometimes used these notes as will become apparent, but the numbering for the Psalms and references for the Bible I have taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.⁴⁰

The following chapter will look at the preface, which is not long but which contains several puzzles. The examination of these few pages not only is a study of what Niketas thought he was doing when he wrote his history, but it also gives a good indication of what to expect in the body of the work. Some comparison with Anna Komnene is made, and it is suggested that Niketas had her work in mind when he wrote his own. Anna Komnene can be seen as an important figure for Niketas, not only because of her history but because of her ambitions which we learn about in the first few pages of his history, where he gives a very negative portrait of this famous figure. In Chapter 3, his descriptions of female characters are looked at more closely. They can be seen as a key to his judgements about the men in their lives, so that the powerful but destructive Anna and her mother Irene can be seen to reflect badly on Alexios I Komnenos. Similarly other women that appear in his pages give an indication of his judgement of the men in their lives, usually their husbands.

Chapter 4 looks at the classical allusions in Niketas' work, which has often simply been described as a classicizing work. On closer inspection however, this seems to be a distracting description. Niketas was not concerned to allude to the great historians of antiquity. His classical learning could be seen more as the grammar of the high register of his language, rather than a tool he consciously deployed. The classical allusions decorate

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the work, and the vocabulary owes much to the vastness of his education, but the main text that influenced the history is the Old Testament.

The next chapter then continues the discussion from the previous one, and demonstrates the debt owed to the Old Testament and considers why Niketas turned to that rather than the New Testament. Niketas is often consulted because of the information he provides on the reigns of emperors in the hundred years leading to the fall of Constantinople. Chapter 6 considers what difference having the Old Testament as a model makes to the way we read what Niketas has to say about the individuals, and how he chooses to criticize or praise them.

Notes

- 1 For a survey of the crusades, see Harris 2014:155–193, Brand 1968:232–269 is now old but remains a clear narrative.
- 2 Simpson 2013:1–2 sets the scene clearly.
- 3 ‘The twelfth and early thirteenth centuries in Byzantine history are largely known to us through the *History* of Niketas Choniates’ (Simpson 2013:1).

As a historian Niketas is a major figure, embittered and disillusioned by the tragedy of his times, he wrote a lengthy and sophisticated narrative that is the single most important source for Byzantine history in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It is also the principal Greek eyewitness account of the capture of Constantinople by the armies of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. (Simpson 2009:14)

- 4 Simpson 2013 appendix 3 looks at Niketas’ depiction of some of the Byzantines’ enemies.
- 5 ‘The historian sought to understand the tragedy of Byzantium primarily in terms of the excesses and corruption of Byzantine society and its rulers, and viewed the conquest of Constantinople as an act of divine retribution’ (Simpson 2009:22).
- 6 See Page 2008 passim on the way the Byzantines described themselves, and chapter 3 in particular on Niketas’ terminology.
- 7 See Rechenauer and Pothou 2011 for thoughts on the way Thucydides wrote his history.
- 8 This passage is discussed in Chapter 2. Page numbers for Niketas’ text are from van Dieten’s edition.
- 9 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the echoes in this phrase.
- 10 Simpson 2013:291 says, ‘He [Niketas] assigns much of the blame to imperial misrule, especially during the reigns of Isaac and Alexios III, but significantly he does not overlook collective responsibility.’ Simpson 2009:27:

The praise and censure of leading individuals, the dominant role assigned to divine providence, the instability of fortune and the sudden reversals in the lives of men, the examples of virtue and vice cited for ethical instruction and the continual moralizing of the historian all point the ancient principles of public utility, moral instruction and didactic function of historical narratives. It is precisely these principles that define Niketas’ historical outlook and give meaning to the events narrated in his *History*.

- 11 Kaldellis 2009:75.
- 12 Kaldellis 2009:75.
- 13 Kaldellis 2009:96. The passage of Niketas is pp. 349–350 in the van Dieten edition. The preface and the depiction of Andronikos will be discussed in later chapters.

- 14 Kaldellis 2009:96: 'Niketas is manipulating reversal and paradox to have an effect on his readers, but what effect?'
- 15 Simpson 2013:131–132:

The work has been traditionally grouped within the category of classicizing histories on the basis of format, language, and content. The choice of contemporary and near contemporary history, the format of imperial biographies along with the complex rhetorical language, the use of rare and archaizing vocabulary and the multitude of citations and allusions drawn from ancient sources would certainly indicate this to be the case . . . in addition to the classicizing characteristics ascribed to the *History* we should also include the pervasive presence of 'trivial' contextual elements usually associated with chronicles.

- 16 Ljubarskij 2000:171, Saxey 2009, Efthymiades 2009b, Simpson 2013:274–279.
- 17 Simpson 2013:68–127, Simpson 2006.
- 18 Simpson 2013:76–77.
- 19 See the discussion in Simpson 2013:77–80 for further complications.
- 20 As emphasized in Kaldellis 2009. See also Efthymiades 2009a and 2009a.
- 21 Niketas tells us this himself, 178 and 638. Page 2008:73–76 for a brief overview of Niketas' life and career. See Simpson 2013:11–23 for what is known of his life.
- 22 Niketas is proud of his brother and says so, 605–606.
- 23 See Magoulias 1984:ix–xii.
- 24 See Simpson 2013:13.
- 25 See Simpson 2013:15–22 on his career.
- 26 See Simpson 2013:20 n.59 on the different versions of the exact title.
- 27 Magoulias 1984:xvi.
- 28 Simpson 2013:129–135 discusses the genre of the work.
- 29 Matthews 2007 on the biographical nature of imperial history.
- 30 Jerome (*Commentary on Zachariah* 3.14) described Tacitus' *Annals* and the *Histories* as 'Lives of the Caesars in thirty books', as Matthews notes, 2007:291.
- 31 See Simpson 2013:214–250 on the sources for the history.
- 32 It does seem, for instance, that he used the history of Kinnamos but the result is very different from Kinnamos' account. See, for instance, the different views of John Axouch: Niketas goes out of his way to praise Axouch: 'he excelled in generalship, was brave in hand-to-hand combat, and endowed with qualities of great leadership' (82). Whereas Kinnamos' narrative gives a far less favourable view of this individual, e.g. III.6. In Niketas' book 4 of Manuel's reign, there is a lengthy account of some adventures of Andronikos, whom we had met earlier, not having been ransomed by Manuel because he was too busy establishing his succession. Andronikos is not described favourably, but neither is much sympathy shown for Manuel by Niketas. Andronikos sought refuge with Saltuq, a Turkish emir, whose lands included Koloneia and Chaldia in the Black Sea region. The paragraph ends saying that Andronikos was skillful in evading Manuel's attempts to arrest him. The next paragraph is about how powerful men fear their excellent subjects and seek to destroy them as potential threats. It's a very striking passage, written with vivid and evocative language and there is no ambiguity in it (143). It would seem that this paragraph coming immediately after describing how Manuel wanted to arrest Andronikos was about him but in fact it would seem that it is introducing a new story; that is Manuel's persecution of the innocent Alexios Axouch. It might seem that Alexios can hardly be described as a Turk although he was John Axouch's son, who was mentioned at the start of this chapter. See Angold 1997:190 who suggests that the Axouch family formed a pro-Seljuk faction at court, opposing a pro-western clique. See also Brand 1989 who discusses these two conflicting accounts, and Maisano 1994. Alexios was very well connected, being married to Maria, daughter of Manuel's older brother Alexios (who had died in 1142) and protostrator. He was John Axouch's oldest son and a man very much trusted by the emperor (97–98). The

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way Niketas presents the story, Alexios is completely innocent and Manuel is a monster. However Kinnamos has a different account, accusing Axouch of being a friend of Kilij Arslan and discussing usurpation with him (book VI, 266). Axouch seems to have been extremely indiscrete about his affiliations because Kinnamos tells us that he had one of his houses painted with murals, not of ancient Greek feats, nor of the emperor's deeds, but commemorating the sultan's military achievements. Confusingly (if there were pro-Seljuq factions versus pro-western factions) Axouch also, according to Kinnamos consulted a Latin magician and wizard (267). One might say that Niketas clearly wants to portray Axouch positively, and there is nothing in Axouch's behaviour in his account that could attract any criticism.

33 Simpson 2013, as well as several excellent articles which are referred to in the course of this book.

34 Catanzaro 2012. He starts off saying

Although we cannot consider the Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates a political thinker in the strict sense of the word, it is possible to find in his *Chronike Dieghesis* some significant elements of political thought concerning the situation in the Byzantine Empire in the XIIth century. One of the most important among them is the theme of ἀσφάλεια which represents, in my opinion, a peculiar characteristic of Niketas' political thought. (221–222)

Catanzaro's discussion does throw light on certain aspects of features of the narrative.

35 See for instance Basinger 1987.

36 Magoulas 1984.

37 See for instance Simpson's comments, 2013:3 and 2009:15.

38 Kazhdan, Maisano and Pontani 1994, van Dieten and Pontani 1999, Pontani 2014 and Grabler 1958a, 1958b, 1958c. This last though is based on an earlier edition by Immanuel Bekker from 1835.

39 Van Dieten 1975.

40 Published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London. Sometimes these references are not the same as in Magoulas' translation.

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2 ‘A history for workers and women’

Statements of intent in the preface

Readers have always been puzzled by Niketas’ preface.¹ Here I wish to look at how scholars have interpreted the preface and what Niketas actually says in it, and then suggest some further factors that may throw light on it. The biggest part of the mystery is the paradox that Niketas expresses the intention in a very high-flown and convoluted manner, well represented in Magoulas’ translation here, that he will be clear:

Since others are of the opinion – and I wholly agree – that in the narration of history they should eschew that which is obscure and distorted by discordant and prolix circumlocutions, and should cherish clarity . . . one shall not find that the events recorded herein fall short of that ideal. Nor have I in any way embraced an affected, recondite, and vulgar² vocabulary, even though many are gaping in eager expectation for this. . . . Above all else, as I have said, the phrase which is not straightforward and easy to comprehend has been rejected, and that which is unadorned, natural and absolutely unambiguous has been preferred and embraced.

(3)

Ἐπεὶ δέ, ὥς καὶ ἄλλοι τε ξυμβαλεῖν ἔχουσι καὶ αὐτὸς δὲ συνορῶν οὐχ ἥκιστα εἰμι, τὰ τοῦ ἱστορεῖν τὸ τῆς διηγήσεως ἀσαφές καὶ περιβολαῖς καὶ περιόδοις ἐπεστραμμένον ὥς μὴ συνᾶδον αὐτοῖς οὐ προσίενται, φιλοῦσι δὲ τὸ σαφές. . . . οὐδὲ τούτου ἕξωθεν τοῦ καλοῦ πίπτοντ’ ἂν εὐρήσει τις τὰ γραφόμενα, οἷα καὶ ἡμῶν μὴ τὸ κομπηρὸν καὶ δυσφραδες καὶ κρημνώδεσιν ἀποδιειλημένον λέξεσιν ὥς ἐπίπαν ἀσπασαμένων, εἰ καὶ χαίνοντές εἰσιν εἰς τοῦτο πολλοὶ εἴτ’ οὖν. . . . ὑπὲρ γὰρ ἅπαν ἕτερον τὸ μὴ τὴν φράσιν ἀπλοῦν, ὥς ἔχω εἰπών, καὶ πρόχερον εἰς κατλήψιν αὐτῇ διαβέβληται καὶ ἡγαπήθη ἕως σφόδρα τὸ ἀκομψον καὶ ἔχον φύσεως διηγούμενον καὶ δαιμονίως τὸ εὐληπτον περιπτύσσεται.

[3]

Gillian Page remarked:

Anna Komnene and Niketas Choniates exemplified the learned style that could verge on the incomprehensible in its striving towards archaic complexities, and which was surely only truly appreciable by a tiny minority – Choniates, after all was paraphrased into easier Greek in the fourteenth century.³

The conundrum of what Niketas was apparently saying in his preface and how he was saying it was noted long ago. As Iordanis Grigoriadis relates:

Already in the sixteenth century annotation of Choniates' text by Hieronymus Wolf we learn of a scribe's scholion which makes this complaint:

οὐκ οἶδα τὶ φης ἐνθάδε, Χωνειάτα, σοφὸν τὸ σαφὲς συγγρά-
φων εἶναι λέγεις εἴτα γρυφώδη καὶ βαραθρώδη γράφεις

I do not understand what you allege here, Choniates:

You declare in your writing that a learned style is the lucid style
and then you compose in oracular and high-flown manner?

'And, by God, not without reason', the annotator continues in support of the objection, 'for I do not know for the sake of what insolent elegance and the imitation of what manner of poetical speech he is prone to pitfalls and uses harsh, if not unsuitable metaphors, especially in the prooimion where he would like to pose among the most well-spoken.'⁴

As Anthony Kaldellis points out, Niketas' stated intentions in the preface 'cannot be taken at face value by anyone who reads further'.⁵ Kaldellis goes on to say:

The contradiction in other words, is not merely between the preface and the narrative but between what the author says and what he does *at the very moment* when he is saying it.⁶

(my emphasis)

Kaldellis draws a connection between this contradiction and what he terms 'one of Niketas' favourite verses from the *Iliad*', namely the sentiment that some men think one thing but say another.⁷ See for instance the episode where Niketas talks about Kamateros' dealings with Styppeiotēs where he says:

Saying one thing and meaning another, and honouring him with his lips while his heart was far from him, he took in the simple and naïve Stypeiotes.

(112)

He goes on to repeat this in the general comment:

With great wisdom man must eschew devising evil in the depth of his heart against his neighbour, holding one thing in his mind and saying another, and he must seek to be touched by the Almighty.

(113)

Earlier he had described the emperor Alexios as:

a dissembler, deeming secretiveness a clever thing and never saying much about what he intended to do.

(6)⁸

The Homeric passage is in the *Iliad*, where Achilles responds to a speech by Odysseus by saying:

I detest like the gates of hell that man who hides one thing in his heart and speaks another.⁹

ἐχθρὸς γάρ μοι κεῖνος ὁμῶς Αἴδαιο πύλῃσιν
ὅς χ' ἕτερον μὲν κεύθη ἐνὶ φρεσίν, ἄλλο δὲ εἶπη.

(*Iliad* 9.312–313)

Achilles was talking to Odysseus, whom he addressed as πολυμήχαν' Ὀδυσσεῦ 'Odysseus of many wiles'. Louden points out that Achilles here, however, must be referring to Agamemnon, not Odysseus, because his argument at that point was only with Agamemnon.¹⁰ Odysseus himself says something similar in the *Odyssey*:

hateful in my eyes as the gates of Hades is that man, who, yielding to stress of poverty, tells a deceitful tale.

ἐχθρὸς γάρ μοι κεῖνος ὁμῶς Αἴδαιο πύλῃσιν
γίγνεται, ὃς πενίῃ εἰκὼν ἀπατήλια βάζει.

(*Odyssey*, 14.156)

However it is interesting to note that although Niketas does refer to Homer frequently throughout his work, he also refers to the Psalms, which also contain similar sentiments, see for instance Psalm 5.9:

14 'A history for workers and women'

Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.

And Psalm 12.2–3:

Everyone lies to their neighbour;
they flatter with their lips
but harbour deception in their hearts.
May the Lord silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue.

And Psalm 43.1:

Vindicate me, my God,
and plead my cause
against an unfaithful nation.
Rescue me from those who are
deceitful and wicked.

And Psalm 50.19–20:

You use your mouth for evil
and harness your tongue to deceit.
You sit and testify against your brother
and slander your own mother's son.

And Psalm 52.2–4:

You who practice deceit,
your tongue plots destruction;
it is like a sharpened razor.
You love evil rather than good,
falsehood rather than speaking the truth.
You love every harmful word.

I would argue that it is not by any means certain that when Niketas describes people as saying one thing but meaning another he is referring to the *Iliad*. The sentiment is clearly in the Psalms which have been so central to worship through the ages.¹¹ With regard to the last passage quoted, with the

phrase about a tongue being like a sharpened razor (Psalm 52.3), Niketas himself says something similar:

When Andronikos later reigned as tyrant, Aaron, an evildoer who was bedeviled by a nature lusting after the most wicked deeds, urged him not to be content with gouging out his opponents' eyes, but either to condemn them all to death or remove them by inflicting the most grievous tortures. He gave himself as an example that attacks were made not only by the hand, for as long as he lived and moved, breathed and talked, he could give counsel, and he could slit the enemy's throat *with his tongue as though it were a sharp knife*.

(147; my emphasis)

Kaldellis, ingeniously suggests:

If hardly anyone in the work speaks his mind, why should Niketas himself? . . . [T]he paradox of the preface, in this sense, prepares us for what comes, if anything can.¹²

Grigoriadis in his article, although it was not primarily on this particular text, also spent some time trying to make sense of Niketas' preface.¹³

Yet if we exclude the assumption that Choniates was totally blind to this apparent contradiction or that he was presenting an ironically unapproachable piece of writing, then we are perhaps urged to look for a sensible interpretation.¹⁴

His conclusion is that this was due to the demands of the genre but even he was not entirely happy with this conclusion. He goes on to admit:

To be sure, seen in the light of modern composition, such practice appears odd, to say the least and ironical. No writer today with sound judgement would have attempted to profess most earnestly in his introduction the employment of the very opposite features of the style which he, in fact, employs. Yet this was, seemingly, a normal rather than an abnormal practice in Byzantine literature, especially in the twelfth century, *although no writer takes it to this extreme*.¹⁵

(my emphasis)

Few authors would introduce their history boasting of their complicated style, and most writers, ancient and modern, would at least claim that they

have tried to be clear, yet it is perhaps worth remembering that those who were most emphatic in their wish to be as clear as possible to the greatest number of people were the Christians.¹⁶ In the works of Christian writers the aim, whether or not it was achieved, was always simplicity and clarity, in an attempt to model themselves on the New Testament, and for proselytizing purposes. The second-century writer Clement of Alexandria wrote of the scriptures that they are

bare of embellishment, and of outward, beauty, verbosity, and flattery, and yet they raise man up although he is strangled by evil.

(*Exhortation to the Greeks* 8.66)

The fifth-century church historian, Socrates, claimed he had tried to write his history simply so that it would be useful for all readers:

Understand [this preface is addressed to Theodore] that I have not concerned myself with style, since I thought that if I had been concerned to use fine phrases, I would perhaps fail in my purpose. Even if I succeed, I simply cannot write the sort of things said by ancient historians. Among them it is customary to exaggerate or diminish facts. Then also the narrative will not edify the majority and the ordinary, who wish only to know what happened and do not admire a text for being elegantly composed. So that the study is not useless both to the educated, since it is not worthy of being compared to ancient writing, and to the uneducated, since they could not understand it, with the facts hidden by refinement of phrasing, I have taken care to adopt a style that seemed clearer and humbler . . . and I shall obey the laws of history, which demand a clear truthful narration of facts unobscured by any covering.

(*Ecclesiastical History* 6 preface)¹⁷

One might think that Niketas perhaps is referring to this topos in Christian writing, referring to it and implicitly rejecting it in his manner of writing. That is not to suggest that Niketas was not a Christian, rather that perhaps his work is related to the phenomenon noted by several scholars that at this difficult time for the Byzantines they started to distinguish themselves from the Latins by emphasizing their classical heritage.¹⁸ They have Christianity in common with those who destroyed their city, so they choose to focus on aspects of their identity that they did not share.¹⁹ One of these was classical culture or Hellenism. Are there any other clues to his intentions in the rest of the preface?

The first paragraph of Niketas' preface had stated that history is useful, as we saw claimed by Socrates and in the manner of many other historians.²⁰

We can learn from the past. Whereas Thucydides had said human nature does not change that much and so certain types of situations will recur, thus giving people the chance to see what is happening, Niketas is much more like Plutarch in his *Lives*.²¹ Niketas' opening words are as follows:

Historical narratives, indeed, have been invented for the common benefit of mankind, since those who will are able to gather from many of these the most advantageous insights. In recording ancient events and customs, the narratives elucidate human nature and provide rich experience of men of noble sentiments, those who nourish a natural love for the good.

(1)²²

Niketas says that he presenting the reader with admirable individuals, who can be models to follow. Like Plutarch, he includes models to avoid. He continues:

In satirising evil and exalting the noble deed, they introduce us, for the most part, to the temperate and the intemperate who incline to one or the other of these two scales. Men who value the attribute of virtue and eschew shameless conduct and corrupt habitude, although born mortal and subject to death, are immortalised and brought back to life by the writing of history. The same is true for those who, on the contrary, have led depraved lives. It is most fitting that the actions of the virtuous and the shameless be known to posterity.

(1–2)²³

Thus the author's first concern is to record vice and virtue, which one might have thought is more an introduction to biography than history. Niketas carries on in this vein:

Whether the actions of a man during his lifetime were holy and righteous or lawless and contemptible, and whether he lived a happy life or gave up the ghost in evil-doing, are proclaimed loudly by history.

(2)

Unlike Plutarch's *Lives*, there is a great deal more vice on show in Niketas' history than virtue. This has a bearing on his views of historical causation, because as will be argued later, he sees the fall of Constantinople not as a result of superior force on the part of the Crusaders but as a failing generally on the part of the Roman emperors.²⁴ As he approaches 1204 in his narrative he has harsh things to say about just about everyone, since he attacks the nobility and the lower classes of the capital (561–564).

He carries on his preface by saying

Wherefore, history can be called the book of the living and the written word a clarion trumpet, raising up those long dead and setting them before the eyes of those who desire to see them.

(2)²⁵

And then a sentence that might lead us to suspect that his intentions are not entirely straightforward:

Let no one be so mad as to believe that there is anything more pleasurable than history.

(3)²⁶

And after finishing reading his work 'pleasurable' is not really the first adjective that comes to mind. In a similar, perhaps ironic vein he also claims that people love listening to very old men (2).²⁷ After all this, he adds that the events he is going to describe are worth describing (3). Thucydides' very first sentence had referred to the magnitude of the war he was going to narrate,²⁸ whereas Niketas had waited a little while before saying:

For these reasons, therefore the events which occurred in my times and shortly before, deserving of narration and remembrance, and being of such a multitude and magnitude, I could not allow to pass in silence. It is then by way of this history that I make these events known to future generations.

(3)

He continues to make the comments about style noted earlier and then makes another remarkable claim, remarkable given the very difficult nature of his language, that history is also for diggers, smiths, soldiers and even women (3).²⁹ Magoulias' translation says 'history is not captious with women who cultivate her.'³⁰ Anthony Kaldellis translated this as 'women who weave' because an alternative reading for μεταλλευούσαις is δια-ξαινούσαις from ξαίνω which means to card or dress wool.³¹ The van Dieten edition would seem to say 'poor women who work in mines' μηδε γυναιξι χερνήτισι δυσκολαίνουσα μεταλλευούσαις. However, if the verb μεταλλεύω is taken in the sense to 'search out' rather than to seek out metals in mines, one can see how Magoulias has come to his translation about poor women who search her (history, that is) out.³²

Reference to such an unexpected audience or readership is connected to being clear and simple and reminiscent of Socrates' words quoted earlier

and is generally typical of Christian writers, that they claim they wish to appeal to the usually neglected sections of society, the lower classes and women.³³ But there is also a very famous woman who may not be completely irrelevant to our discussion here, namely Anna Komnene, who had written a history of the deeds of her father, the emperor Alexios I. In what follows I suggest that Niketas had her work and her interpretation in mind when he wrote his own.

Niketas' preface asks for forgiveness if his work is not very good, that it lacks distinction and grace, but he explains this is the first time he has written a history (3–4).³⁴ He informs the reader that he will start with the death of Emperor Alexios Komnenos because previous historians had finished there (the aforementioned Anna Komnene, as well as Michael Glykas and John Zonaras, though he does not name them³⁵). And then at the end, he explains that for the history of John's reign:

Since I was not an eyewitness of that which I have recorded, I could not describe these events extensively but have set down what I heard from those contemporaries who personally knew the emperor and who escorted him on his campaigns against the enemy and accompanied him into battle. It is best that I begin here.

(4)³⁶

So for most of his history, Niketas was an eyewitness, and where he was not he recognizes that it is important to have sources that were.

Despite the nod to Christian writing in that he claims to be writing clearly for all manner of readers, this for the most part looks like a classical preface. The language is of the highest register. It is in fact very difficult to understand. There is no mention of God, or tracing God's will through the course of events. Hades and Tithonos (the brother of Priam) are named as well as the god of war, Ares (2, 3).³⁷ In paragraph 2 (quoted earlier) there are verbal references to the Psalms (when he mentions the book of the living) and to the first letter to the Corinthians (when he mentions raising up those long dead),³⁸ but also to Euripides, who is called a sage (3).³⁹ Although the history is structured according to the reigns of emperors, it is more than a series of imperial portraits. Rather as Suetonius had one favourable portrait, or perhaps better one largely favourable, that of Augustus and then less so with his successors, so Niketas draws a generally positive picture of John Komnenos, the first reign he describes, the son of Alexios the founder of the Komnene dynasty, but mostly is highly critical of those who ruled after him.

The part of Niketas' preface about immortalizing good and bad characters from the past is reminiscent of Anna's introduction, which was very much on the theme of how history stops things being forgotten. Her

preface is longer than Niketas' and much more personal, and she also tells us that she is writing because her mother had asked her (Anna's) husband to write about her own husband, Alexios, that is Anna's own father, but that he had died before he could finish it. So Anna undertook to complete the work. Her first paragraph compares time to water which carries everything off into the depths of oblivion, and her history was to become a bulwark, which in fact it has been.⁴⁰

Niketas had said that he would continue where previous historians left off, and she is normally assumed to be included here as her work ends with the death of Alexios. Anna's language is high-flown,⁴¹ the preface replete with classical references, and she also informs us that she has had a full classical education.⁴² Niketas does not tell us this about himself but he did not need to. Anna being a woman had to prove herself at the start and she lays her claim to being a worthy author at the beginning.⁴³

I, Anna, daughter of the Emperor Alexius and the Empress Irene, born and bred in the Purple, not without some acquaintance with literature – having devoted the most earnest study to the Greek language, in fact, and being not unpractised in Rhetoric and having read thoroughly the treatises of Aristotle and the dialogues of Plato and having fortified my mind with the Quadrivium⁴⁴ of sciences (these things must be divulged, and it is not self-advertisement to recall what Nature and my own zeal for knowledge have given me, nor what God has apportioned to me from above and what has been contributed by opportunity).

(Preface, 1)⁴⁵

As she points out, she has to tell her readers this to reassure them that this history is worth reading, that the author is educated enough. Her history reveals, all the way through, the high level of her education and the depth of her knowledge of classical texts, especially Homer.⁴⁶ It has been noted that Alexios, at least as his daughter has portrayed him, has characteristics of Odysseus.⁴⁷ Not all historians used Homer as Anna did. Her Homeric allusions have been noted and her title is 'obviously an allusion to Homer's *Iliad*'.⁴⁸ Anna's title would seem more similar to that of the *Odyssey* than the *Iliad* despite the shared 'ad' ending (αδ in Greek). The *Alexiad* is formed from Alexios' name, just as the *Odyssey* is from Odysseus. The *Iliad* is named after the city, not a man. Ljubarskij goes on to comment that Niketas Choniates has even more Homeric references than Anna.⁴⁹ Ljubarskij's argument is that this mix of history and epic was Anna's own creation.⁵⁰ Was Niketas reacting in some way to Anna's? One might also suggest that Niketas' own history is a sort of *Iliad*, in that it is the tale of the downfall of a city.

Anna in book 14 talks about her situation while writing this book. She says she mourns three rulers – her father, her mother and her husband (notice, not her brother).⁵¹ She said:

Most of the evidence I collected myself, especially in the reign of the third emperor after Alexius.

(14.7)⁵²

Her description of her life shows the isolation she felt, as well as the lack of status. She says that she was not allowed to see anyone:

For the most part, therefore, I pass my time in obscurity and devote myself to my books and the worship of God. Not even the less important persons are allowed to visit us, let alone those from whom we could have learnt news they happened to have heard from others, or my father's most intimate friends. For thirty years now, I swear it by the souls of the most blessed emperors, I have not seen, I have not spoken to a friend of my father; most of them of course have passed away but many too are prevented by fear because of the change in our fortunes. For the powers that be have decided that we must not be seen – an absurd decision – and have condemned us to a general execration.

(14.7)

So she was still writing in 1148⁵³ – she says she is mourning her husband who died in 1137. Her father had died in 1118 and her mother Irene Doukaina perhaps in the 1120s or 1130s.⁵⁴ Her brother John had died in 1143. His death was closest in time when she was writing, but she does not mention him. Read alongside Niketas' account of the succession, her silence is understandable. As portrayed by him, Anna as the first child and encouraged by her mother, had had hopes of being Alexios' heir but having been thwarted, had had to watch her younger brother succeed, followed by her nephew.⁵⁵

A little earlier when describing the perils her father had faced, she said:

But at this stage of my history the reader perhaps will say that I am naturally biased. My answer is this: I swear by the perils the emperor endured for the well-being of the Roman people, by his sorrows and the travails he suffered on behalf of the Christians, that I am not favouring him when I say or write such things. On the contrary, where I perceive that he was wrong I deliberately transgress the law of nature and stick to the truth. *I regard him as dear, but truth as dearer still. As one of*

*the philosophers somewhere remarked 'Both are dear, but it is best to honour truth more highly.'*⁵⁶

(14.7; my emphasis)

This last sentence is an echo of Aristotle's:

Yet it would perhaps be thought to be better, indeed to be our duty, for the sake of maintaining the truth even to destroy what touches us closely, especially as we are philosophers or lovers of wisdom; for, while both are dear, *piety requires us to honour truth above our friends.*⁵⁷

(*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1.6, 1096a15; my emphasis)

Niketas too refers either to Aristotle or Anna or both, when towards the end of his history he says

Inasmuch as the worst elements prevail among the Constantinopolitans (*for truth is dearer to me than my compatriots*⁵⁸), Doukas grew stronger and increased in power.

(564; my emphasis)

Was Niketas mocking Anna's style at the start, pretending to wish to be clear but in fact writing in difficult Greek, as Anna herself does? Homer is very important in the composition of her narrative, and similarly, as Ljubarskij has noted, is constantly present in Niketas' account.⁵⁹ Niketas has no love for the Komnenos family. His whole work begins with her family, and in his opening book when describing the succession he gives a very different picture of that family. And towards the end he makes the following comment:

It was the Komnenos family that was the major cause of the destruction of the empire; because of their ambitions and their rebellions, she suffered the subjugation of provinces and cities and finally fell to her knees. These Komnenoi who sojourned among the barbarian nations hostile to the Romans, were the utter ruin of their country and whenever they attempted to seize and hold sway over our public affairs, they were the most inept, unfit and stupid of men.

(529)⁶⁰

In what follows I will argue that Andronikos is the Odysseus figure for Niketas, corresponding to Alexios in Anna's.⁶¹ However, Niketas turns the image round and gives a negative portrayal.⁶²

Like Anna, Niketas was also writing contemporary history and he tells the reader this at the start (the end of the preface). He was alive for the period he wrote about except the reign of John, and he was brief about that and took his information he says from those who served under John. Anna, in her protestation that, although Alexios was her father, she wrote the truth about his reign, comments that she could do nothing else seeing that people were still alive who remembered those times:

I have followed the actual course of events, without additions of my own, without suppression and so I speak and write. And the proof of this is near to hand. I am not writing the history of things that happened 10,000 years ago, but there are men still live today who knew my father and tell me of his deeds. They have in fact made a not inconsiderable contribution to the history, for one reported or recalled to the best of his ability one fact, while another told me something else – but there was no discrepancy in their accounts. Most of the time, moreover, we were ourselves present, for we accompanied our father and mother. Our lives by no means revolved round the home.

(14.7)

She goes on to say:

As I was saying, some of my material is the result of my own observations; some I have gathered in various ways from the emperor's comrades-in-arms, who sent us information about the progress of the wars by people who crossed the straits. Above all I have often heard the emperor and George Palaeologus discussing these matters in my presence. Most of the evidence I collected myself, especially in the reign of the third emperor after Alexius, at a time when all the flattery and lies had disappeared with his grandfather (all men flatter the current ruler but no one makes the slightest attempt to over-praise the departed; they tell the bare facts and describe things just as they happened).⁶³

(14.7)

She told at the start of her history what her qualifications for writing are, namely her birth and her learning.⁶⁴ Her history, like that of Niketas, is one of lamentation.⁶⁵ She comments on this in the preface and also in books 14 and 15:

I perceive that I am digressing from the main theme, because the subject of my history imposes on me a two-fold duty: to relate the facts

of the emperor's life and also to expose their tragic nature. In other words, I have to give an account of his struggles and at the same time to do justice to all that has caused me heart-felt sorrow.

(15.11)

And a little later she goes on:

I even heard him once reprove the empress when she was ordering scholars to write a history of his labours, his many trials and tribulations, so that the record of them might be handed down to future generations; it would be better, he said to grieve for him and deplore his miseries.

(15.11)

In fact, this is what Niketas does, although in his case it is the fate of Constantinople rather than an emperor. His grief also intrudes into the narrative regularly, that is, his grief at the state of the empire, though one could say that for the Byzantines the figure of the emperor was a representation of the state.⁶⁶

Niketas lost everything too that gave meaning to his life. He does not attack Anna directly, but his opening description of the scramble for succession as Alexios is dying casts the family in a bad light and the most explicit blame he casts is for the Komnene family (529, quoted earlier). I would argue that Niketas' opening scene gives us a clue as to what he wanted his readers to think. He may in fact have said one thing while having another in his heart, but his history does show what he thought of the catastrophe he had lived through. And I will argue that he saw it all starting from there, as one might expect. This scene will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 See for instance Grigoriadis 1998, Maisano 1994 or Kaldellis 2009.
- 2 The translator Harry J. Magoulas gives 'vulgar' but the Greek κρημνώδειςιν λέξεσιν is more precisely rendered 'words like steep mountain ridges'.
- 3 Page 2008:61.
- 4 Grigoriadis 1998:339. Grigoriadis also has the note that the scholion, 3 lines of 15 syllable verse, was attributed tentatively by Hieronymus Wolf to Alexander Chartophylax.
- 5 Kaldellis 2009:76.
- 6 Kaldellis 2009:77. Maisano 1994:78 also discusses this passage 'da leggersi evidentemente come paradosso'. Simpson 2013:280–284 surveys the literature on the preface and also discusses it earlier (124–127). While acknowledging the difficulty of the text, and the fact that even those close in time to the author had problems to understand his language (125), Simpson nevertheless seems to give some credence to the stated intention of his preface. On page 127 she says,

The *History* was, no doubt, difficult to understand, but Byzantine audiences nevertheless attempted to reap knowledge from the words of Niketas, and, as we have seen, he himself expressed the wish that his history would reach diggers, smiths, soldiers and common women.

Dissembling discourse was a feature of learned rhetoric of the eleventh and twelfth centuries; see for instance, Mullett 2013.

- 7 Kaldellis 2009:77.
- 8 Κρυψίνους ὁ ἀνὴρ οὗτος καὶ σοφὸν ἡγούμενος αἰεὶ τό περίεργον, μηδὲ τὰ πολλὰ ἐξαγγελτικός τοῦ ποιητέου δεικνύμενος.
- 9 Kaldellis 2009:77.
- 10 Loudon 2006:129.
- 11 See later discussion of the importance of the Psalms to Niketas in Chapter 5.
- 12 Kaldellis 2009:78.
- 13 Grigoriadis 1998.
- 14 Grigoriadis 1998:399.
- 15 Grigoriadis 1998:340.
- 16 See for instance Origen's remarks, *Contra Celsum* VII. 59.
- 17 See Urbainczyk 1997:81–105 on the genres of Christian and classicizing historiography and MacMullen 1966, 17, pp. 108–112, on the relation between the educated and their new audience.
- 18 See Macrides and Magdalino 1992 especially 155–156. Also Kaldellis 2007:296. Page remarks, 'In the context of an increasing feeling of alien encirclement, the classical contrast between Hellene and barbarian was beguiling and could well remain so for the term of the beleaguered empire.' 2008:66. See also Neville 2012:192 for some remarks on the sense of identity.
- 19 Kaldellis 2007:287:

As Byzantine intellectuals became less disturbed by the paganism of the ancient authors and heroes and turned to them as models of natural virtue in an ethical field increasingly independent of Christian strictures, Hellenism was gradually redefined from being the negative opposite of Christianity to being the positive opposite of barbarism.

- 20 Thucydides 1.24.4 wrote:

It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which [human nature being what it is] will at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future. My work is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public but was done to last forever.

See also Akropolites in his first sentence: 'The usefulness of history has already been defined by our predecessors and we must repeat much of what they had to say.' *History* 1.

- 21 Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 1 and *Life of Demetrius* 1. Simpson 2013:280–282 notes that Heinrich Lieberich noted parallels between Niketas' preface and that of Diodorus Siculus. Diodorus too had a moral purpose which is reflected in what Niketas has to say. Diodorus' preface was much longer and more clearly expressed. For a discussion of his claims and execution of these claims, see Urbainczyk 2008:81–83.
- 22 My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge who corrected Magoulias' translation here.
- 23 The translation appears opaque but it gives a good impression of the Greek. Καὶ κακία δὲ παρ' αὐταῖς κωμωδουμένη καὶ ἀγαθοπραξία ἐξαιρομένη μετρίους ὥς τὰ πολλὰ καὶ ἐπιιδόντας τοὺς παρ' ἑκάτερα τιθέασι ῥέποντας, ὅσοι τέως οὐχ ὑπ' αἰσχίστης συνηθείας καὶ φαυλοτέρας τῆς ἔξεως ἀνεπιστρόφως ἔχουσι τοῦ πολυεράστου χρήματος ἀρετῆς, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἀθανάτοις εἰκόασι δῆπουθεν θνητοῖ

και ἐπίκηροι γεγονότες καὶ πάλαι τὸ ζῆν ἐκτοξεύσαντες ὅσους παρειλήφει τὸ ἱστορεῖν. ὀρθῶς γὰρ ἡ τουναντίον φαύλως βεβιωκότες εὐ τε καὶ ὡς αἰσχρῶς ἀκούουσι. My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge who suggested a better translation of κωμωδουμένη than Magoulas' 'abasing'. See Simpson 2013:146 on Niketas' use of satire as well as Magdalino 2009:74.

24 Simpson 2009:22 expresses it thus:

Equally important, and not at all unrelated, is Niketas' criticism of Byzantine society which has been perceived to echo Crusader complaints of Byzantium ever since Edward Gibbon pronounced that the treachery of the Greeks was confirmed 'by the honest confession of a Greek historian, who dared to prefer truth to his country.' This is because the historian sought to understand the tragedy of Byzantium primarily in terms of the excesses and corruption of Byzantine society and its rulers, and viewed the conquest of Constantinople as an act of divine retribution.

25 The allusions will be discussed later but here, as Magoulas points out 1984:372 notes 2 and 3, one can see echoes of Psalm 69.28

May they be blotted out of the book of life
and not be listed with the righteous.

And 1 Corinthians 15.52: 'in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed'.

26 Μη οὕτω μανείη τις ὡς ἡδίων ἡγείσθαι τι ἕτερον ἱστορίας

27 ἃ γὰρ οἱ πολυετείς τῶν ἀνθρώπων καὶ Τιθωνοῦ παλαιότεροι καὶ τρικώρωνοι, εἰ τῷ βίῳ ἐτι περιήσαν, ἤδεσαν ἂν καὶ ἐξηγούντο τοῖς φιλακροάμοσι

28 Thucydides 1.1.

29 ἐρώσα δ' ὅμως προκεῖσθαι σκαπανεύσι τε καὶ σιδηρεῦσι καὶ πολλῆς γέμουσι τῆς ἀσβολῆς καὶ συνήθης εἶναι τοῖς πρὸς ὅπλα καὶ Ἀρεὰ βλέπουσι, μὴδε γυναιξὶ χερνήτισι δυσκολαίνουσα μεταλλευούσαις τὰ καθ' αὐτήν. (3.52–55)

30 Magoulas 1984:4.

31 Kaldellis 2009:75–99, p. 76. This reading was also one used by Grigoriadis 1998:340.

32 Lampe lists the additional meanings of 'dig' or 'search out'.

33 Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* book 4 is an interesting study on the art of writing in the early church, for example:

But the theories and rules on this subject (to which, when you add a tongue thoroughly skilled by exercise and habit in the use of many words and many ornaments of speech, you have what is called eloquence or oratory) may be learnt apart from these writings of mine, if a suitable space of time be set aside for the purpose at a fit and proper age. But only by those who can learn them any one who cannot learn this art quickly can never thoroughly learn it at all (1). Whether this be true or not, why need we inquire? For even if this art can occasionally be in the end mastered by men of slower intellect, I do not think it of so much importance as to wish men who have arrived at mature age to spend time in learning it. It is enough that boys should give attention to it; and even of these, not all who are to be fitted for usefulness in the Church, but only those who are not yet engaged in any occupation of more urgent necessity, or which ought evidently to take precedence of it. For men of quick intellect and glowing temperament find it easier to become eloquent by reading and listening to eloquent speakers than by following rules for eloquence. And even outside the canon, which to our great advantage is fixed in a place of secure authority, there is no want of ecclesiastical writings, in reading which a man of ability will acquire a tinge of the eloquence with which they are written, even though he does not aim at this, but is solely intent on the matters treated of; especially, of course, if in addition he practise himself in writing, or dictating, and at last also in speaking, the opinions he has formed on grounds of piety them, and who speak with fluency and elegance, cannot always think of them when they are

speaking so as to speak in accordance with them, unless they are discussing the rules themselves. Indeed, I think there are scarcely any who can do both things – that is, speak well, and; in order to do this, think of the rules of speaking while they are speaking. For we must be careful that what we have got to say does not escape us whilst we are thinking about saying it according to the rules of art. Nevertheless, in the speeches of eloquent men, we find rules of eloquence carried out which the speakers did not think of as aids to eloquence at the time when they were speaking, whether they had ever learnt them, or whether they had never even met with them. *For it is because they are eloquent that they exemplify these rules; it is not that they use them in order to be eloquent.*' 4.3.4 [my emphasis]

See also Gamble 1995:1–41.

- 34 This had been a topos in history writing for a long time; see for instance Cain 2016:52–54.
- 35 The *Alexiad* in 15 volumes was a history of her father's achievements. Anna lived 1083–1153. Her husband, Nikephorus Bryennios, had started writing about Alexios' reign. He died in 1137 and Anna, aged 55, finished it – it covered Alexios' reign 1081–1118. Michael Glykas wrote *The Chronicle of Events from the Creation of the World to the Death of Alexius I Comnenus* (1118). John Zonaras wrote *Extracts of History* (Ἐπιτομή Ἱστοριῶν, *Epitome Historiarum*), in eighteen books, which covers the period from the creation of the world to the death of Alexius (1118).
- 36 One might suggest that it is for this reason that Niketas' account of John's reign is relatively positive. He ends thus:

He only just failed to reach the very summit of self-control and steadfastness and barely escaped the charge of parsimony; depriving no one of life nor inflicting bodily injury of any kind throughout his entire reign, he has been deemed praiseworthy by all, even to our own times, the crowning glory, so to speak of the Komnenian dynasty to sit on the Roman throne, and one might well say that he equaled some of the best emperors of the past and surpassed the others. (47)

And yet later he writes: 'It was the Komnenos family that was the major cause of the destruction of the empire; because of their ambitions and their rebellions, she suffered the subjugation of provinces and cities and finally fell to her knees' (529).

- 37 The classical nature of the preface will also be discussed in Chapter 4. The mention of Hades need not be a sign of a classical reference however, since we meet in Luke 10.15 a reference to Hades καὶ σύ, Καφarnaουμ, μὴ ἕως οὐρανοῦ ὑψωθῇς; ἕως τοῦ Αἰδοῦ καταβῇς. 'And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.'
- 38 As in the earlier note, the references here are to Psalm 69.28 and 1 Corinthians 15.52.
- 39 Niketas says: 'and should cherish clarity as not only being in accord with the words of the sage', which is identified by van Dieten 1975:3 (and Magoulias 1984:372, note 7) as alluding to Euripides' *Orestes* 397, where Menelaus says: 'Wisdom is shown in clarity, not in obscurity.'
- 40 Grigoriadis 1998:335–337 has a careful discussion on her preface.
- 41 Ljubarskij describes Anna's writing thus:

Moreover, the elevated and, to an ordinary person, hardly comprehensible style of the *Alexiad*, with its Homeric air and unrealistic descriptions moved, as it were, the reader, even of Anna's time, into a special and conventional world separated from every day life, a world populated almost exclusively by heroes of enormous strength and pictures of beauty rather than simply by men and women. (2000:175)

- 42 Roger Scott notes though that the situation is not as simple as mere borrowing:

The point of my sprint through Byzantine historiography is to suggest that it has a distinct tradition quite separate from classical Greek historiography. It is a branch

of propaganda or advertisement (even if it is honest advertisement) and takes as its main subject individual rulers. It may turn to the classics for help, but when it does so it turns to biography rather than history. But in Anna's *Alexiad*, the various distinctive features of classical historiography (the preface, the formal speeches and the learned digressions) are certainly present. (1981:71)

Scott, after remarking that Georgina Buckler had noted that Anna used Plutarch more than Thucydides, commented on the lack of connection between Byzantine and Latin traditions (1981:71–73).

- 43 As Neville 2016:6 points out: 'In fact, she [Anna] may have been the only woman to write a history in Greek prior to the twentieth century.' See also Neville 2016:15–29.
- 44 Geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music, which followed the trivium, i.e. grammar, rhetoric and logic.
- 45 Translated by E.R.A. Sewter for Penguin Classics.
- 46 Ljubarskij 2000. Gouma-Peterson 2000 is a very useful volume on Anna.
- 47 'Yet it is not the *Iliad* alone which resounds in Anna's title and story. The *Odyssey* also is central to her work. For Anna alludes to qualities of Alexios which are Odysseus-like: he is ever quick-witted, able to find a solution for every problem which comes his way' (Macrides 2000:68).
- 48 Ljubarskij 2000:171. And see note 11 in Ljubarskij's article for bibliography on the Homeric allusions.
- 49 'I would like to call attention to the fact that, for example in the history of Niketas Choniates living a few decades later there are 191 Homeric citations, among them 135 from the *Iliad* and 56 from the *Odyssey*' (Ljubarskij 2000:171).
- 50 Ljubarskij 2000:180.
- 51 Magdalino 2000:21:

Toward the end of the book, in the key passage where she digresses on the subject of its composition, she declares: 'I now mourn three kings (βασιλεῖς), my father the emperor, my lady and mother the queen (βασιλίς) and my husband the Caesar.' The exclusion of John from this list of *basileis* is as striking as the inclusion of Nikephoros Bryennios.

- 52 Given the Byzantine way of counting inclusively, this means she wrote in the reign of Manuel.
- 53 Laiou 2000:1.
- 54 For a discussion of when Irene died see page 649, introduction to Number 27. '*Kecharitomene: Typikon* of Empress Irene Doukaina Komnene for the Convent of the Mother of God *Kecharitomene* in Constantinople' in *Byzantine Monastic Foundation Documents: A Complete Translation of the Surviving Founders' Typika and Testaments* edited by John Thomas and Angela Constantinides Hero with the assistance of Giles Constable, Published by Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection Washington, DC 2000, transl. R. Jordan. Polemis 1968:71 with note 17.
- 55 Hill 2000.
- 56 Ἀμφοῖν γὰρ ὄντοιν φίλοιν, ὥς ποῦ τις ἔφη φιλόσοφος, κράτιστον προτιμᾶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν.
- 57 Ἀμφοῖν γὰρ ὄντοιν φίλοιν ὁσίων προτιμᾶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν.
- 58 φιλτέρα γὰρ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ὁμογενεῖς ἡ ἀλήθεια. Earlier he had made a similar comment, when Frederick Barbarossa was passing through the Byzantine empire on the way to Palestine, Niketas is blunt about the two Romans sent to deal with Frederick who had sent envoys about his journey. Niketas says about 'the logothete [who had been named a little earlier as John Doukas (402)] and Andronikos Kantakouzenos' that 'through ignorance of their obligations and their unmanliness' they made the king angry and turned him against the emperor. He explains why he uses such direct words about his own countrymen, 'for it is our duty to honour truth as being more important and precious than our own dear friends' *χρεὼν γὰρ φίλων ἡμῖν τῶν ἀνδρῶν ὄντων ὥς πρεσβύτεραν καὶ φιλέραν τιμᾶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν* (402).

59 Ljubarskij 2000:171.

60 Simpson 2013:291 notes:

Significantly both the rebellion [of Michael Komnenos Doukas] and Niketas' express statement of blame were added in the a-text [the longer version, which was written later] which can only mean the historian was making his case with hindsight. And it was a case based entirely on human fault rather than some kind of incomprehensible providential design.

The passage could include the Angeloi since they were related, for example, Isaakios II Angelos was the great-grandson of Alexios I Komnenos.

61 See Saxey 2009.

62 Simpson 2013:158–170.

63 Anna, counting inclusively, means Manuel by the 3rd emperor. See Tacitus *Annals* 1.1 and *Histories* 1.1 for similar observations about death removing reasons for being biased. Arrian, in the preface to his *Anabasis*, has the amusing argument about his sources, Ptolemy and Aristoboulos: 'Moreover, they are both more worthy of credit, because they compiled their histories after Alexander's death, when neither compulsion was used nor reward offered them to write anything different from what really occurred.'

64 See Neville 2016:31–41.

65 See Neville 2016:61–74 on the lamentation in Anna's work.

66 As Laiou states:

[I]n her [Anna's] work there is the powerful presence of two individuals, the author and the hero. Ostensibly there is one impersonal entity which is paramount: that is the state, the Byzantine Empire, the one political entity that matters, that has a historic role to play. But her father, whose history she writes, also has a historic role: to safeguard, preserve and expand this state. Thus, the impersonal entity becomes almost merged with the individual and then it is an easy step for *his* actions to become the focus of the narrative. (2000:7)

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3 The world of Byzantine women

It is worth recalling also, however, that the language of Choniates' *History* reflects a deeply ingrained notion amongst Byzantine men (and women) of culture that the Attic literary tradition as cultivated by the learned down the centuries comprised an integral part of the Byzantine identity.¹

Although Niketas wrote a classicizing history, one aspect of his work that strikes the reader as perhaps not typically characteristic of texts written in antiquity is the frequency with which women are mentioned by him.² As seen earlier, they even appear in the preface as potential readers of his history. It has been noted before that what writers say about women can show us attitudes towards the male characters in their work.³ Consequently, looking at what Niketas writes about women may help shed light not only on their male relatives but also what message he wishes to convey to the reader.⁴

Irene and Anna

The opening scene of Niketas' history is curious in that it is a domestic one, featuring the emperor's wife and daughter. In fact there is nothing else quite like it in the history and it does not set the tone for the rest of the work. The very first sentence of the narrative proper is 'Emperor Alexios Komnenos begat three sons and four daughters' (4.83).⁵ The history starts with Alexios' wife, the Empress Irene, trying to persuade her husband to bequeath the empire to his oldest child, Anna, rather than to his oldest son, John. Anna would have been in her mid-thirties and John in his early thirties. Niketas says:

The mother, Empress Irene, in opposition, threw her full influence on the side of her daughter Anna and lost no opportunity to calumniate

their son John before her husband Alexios, mocking him as rash and pleasure loving.

(5)⁶

Had Alexios agreed to his wife's wishes, Anna's husband, Nikephoros Bryennios, would have been the emperor and Alexios points out in the first speech of the history, which occurs early on (5–6), to his wife, that it would be very odd for him to prefer his son-in-law to his own son. Niketas on the other hand, as the preceding quotation reveals, presents the real issue as being a daughter being preferred to a son rather than the son-in-law being more suitable.

That Niketas reports Alexios as speaking, and giving us his words draws our attention to what he says, not least because there are very few speeches in the history at all.⁷ And the first, this short one by Alexios, occurs on the first page, and being the words of the reigning emperor, we read them carefully. Niketas had introduced the matter saying that Alexios sometimes simply pretended to be deaf when his wife was talking to him about the matter, sometimes he said he was thinking about it, and when he could not stand her persistence any more he would say the following, and this is where Niketas inserts the speech (5). So the speech seems to be a general speech giving the usual arguments he would use to assert his position.

Alexios tells his wife to stop petitioning him on behalf of her daughter, before going on to point out that it would be strange to prefer a nonblood relation, that is, his son-in-law, over his own son. As Efthymiades points out, Niketas uses speeches to voice his own thoughts.⁸ In this case, the words of the speeches must be those of Niketas, especially in this case where it is unlikely there were witnesses who reported the words. Thus it is worthwhile to look at what Niketas says in this speech. The first sentence is very strong:

O woman, sharer of my bed and empire, will you not desist from admonishing me on behalf of your daughter, attempting thereby to dissolve praiseworthy harmony and good order (τάξις) as though you had been stricken by some God-sent madness?

(5)⁹

One might say this is Niketas' view of what happened to the state as a whole. It was stricken by some madness, and harmony and good order were destroyed. When discussing the emperor John's thinking about his sister's attempted usurpation, Kaldellis observes:

What he [John] says at that moment sets the tone, I believe, for the entire *History*: 'how greatly has natural order (*taxis*) been overturned for me!

Kin have become my enemies and outsiders my friends!’ . . . ‘Nature’ and *taxis* – the word that signified the Byzantine understanding of human and cosmic order – have been overturned, for Ioannes and, on a larger scale, for the author of the *History*. This happens again and again in the work, leading directly to the very destruction of Byzantium.¹⁰

The emperor, Alexios, goes on to tell his wife to ‘trust in good fortune’,¹¹ which is rather curious – he does not tell her to pray to God for guidance. He also goes on to refer to the way he had come to the throne himself, and here the words strike the reader as improbable:

All the Romans would laugh aloud at me and conclude that I had lost my senses should I, who gained the throne in an unpraiseworthy manner by [shedding] the blood of my fellow countrymen and the principles of Christian laws, when it came time to leave a succession, replace the child of my loins with the Macedonian.

(6)¹²

Did Alexios really admit that he had come to the throne in an unpraiseworthy manner? As Neville points out in relation to this speech, ‘Here Alexios condemns himself for usurpation and his wife for insanity.’¹³ Perhaps more to the point, is it likely that Niketas thought his readers would have believed that Alexios would have acknowledged that he had usurped the throne? Also it is notable that twice in the same short speech, the emperor refers to actions that are not praiseworthy, a notion that thus might attach itself to our judgement of Alexios’ behaviour. The speech gives Alexios’ refusal to his wife in a straightforward way, although later Niketas characterizes him as duplicitous. Niketas says,

Having presented these cogent arguments to Empress Irene, he would once again behave as though he had no objections and divert the woman by pretending to be deliberating.

(6)

And Niketas goes on to say that the emperor was

a dissembler, deeming secretiveness a clever thing and never saying much about what he intended to do.

(6)¹⁴

Later when Alexios is about to die his wife reproaches him with his deceptive nature:

Oh husband, in life you excelled in all kinds of deceits, gilding your tongue with contradictory meaning, and even now as you are departing this life you remain unchanged from your former ways.

(7)¹⁵

The contrast with the depiction by Anna of the relationship between Alexios and his wife could not be greater.¹⁶ Anna's Alexios is heroic, an adjective no one would use of the figure portrayed by Niketas. Angeliki Laiou remarks:

The Byzantine Empire occupies the center of the world, and her father occupies center stage in Byzantium . . . it is . . . God who placed on the throne her father, a Christ-like figure, who devoted his great talents to the defense and enlargement of the state.¹⁷

And Ruth Macrides, in the same volume about Anna Komnene, writes:

For Anna alludes to qualities of Alexios which are Odysseus-like: he is ever quick witted, able to find a solution for every problem which comes his way.¹⁸

The situation Niketas described was in a way irrelevant as John did succeed, but this preliminary information is to set the scene for Anna's attempted coup, which was a failure. In a sense, all of the beginning could have been omitted, except that Niketas is making a point. He is showing how disunited the Komnenes were, and how ambitious and unwomanly the Komnene women were. The question of the heir had seemed simple initially, but Alexios himself is presented as complicating matters. It was normal for the oldest son to succeed, and the reader is given no reason to think that Alexios was not fond of his, so his wife had a weak case. However as Niketas presents it, the emperor liked secrecy, and what is clear from the way Niketas describes the scene is that he was unable to control his wife.

The empress herself is shown in a very active light, trying to influence this critical decision:

She continuously attempted to persuade the emperor to change his mind.

(5)¹⁹

It however is striking that Niketas starts with this domestic scene and one which for female readers might seem rather progressive – the wife trying to promote the interests of her daughter even though she had three sons.

Anna herself is an unusual character, though it should perhaps be noted that Niketas does not reveal the most interesting fact about her which is that she had written a history of her own. As Gouma-Peterson expresses it after describing how the influential women in Anna's own history all derived their power from the emperor:

In claiming the power of authorship as official historian of her father's deeds, Anna, through conscious choice, transcends all the categories within which she has been engendered as a woman. Through this choice, the middle-aged Anna, banished from court, having lost both parents and husband, and living in exile, probably in the monastery of the Kecharitomene founded by her mother, Irene, came as close to power as possible within the context of her life.²⁰

When commenting on Anna, Niketas describes her as being:

ardently devoted to philosophy, the queen of all the sciences, and was educated in every field of learning.

(10)²¹

This might seem to be a positive statement, but we are not informed as to whether Niketas thought these were accomplishments befitting a woman. The description of her attempted coup is in such a prominent position, coming so soon at the start of the history, and indeed the very start of the work is setting up the scene to explain that attempt, that Niketas would seem to be drawing attention to it. The picture he paints is of a woman, admittedly the oldest child, but with three brothers makes an attempt on the throne threatening the stability of the empire because of her unseemly ambition. Byzantium was not a hotbed of feminism, and Niketas himself shows no sign of having held a high opinion of imperial women.²² For instance about Maria, the wife of Branas, niece of Manuel and daughter of Isaakios, Niketas says:

She was prudent and much esteemed for *her ability to hold her tongue*, which is so becoming to women and *for which* her maternal uncle, Emperor Manuel called her virtuous among women and the flower of his family.

(389; my emphasis)²³

This is not to argue that Niketas saw Anna as responsible for the fall of Constantinople, but her behaviour and the inability of the men in her family to curb her would seem a symptom of the inherent weakness of the empire. What will be demonstrated in this chapter is that the way the

women behave is an indication of the decline and that this is really why we are shown so much of their lives. Their actions, and the way their men deal with them, illustrates the extent to which the imperial family had lost its ability and authority to rule, culminating with the arch monster Euphrosyne. Leonora Neville expresses the situation:

The analytic goal of Choniates's history was to explain what went wrong with the Roman Empire that led to the Latin conquest. By portraying Alexios's court as a locus of gender inversion and unnatural power relations, Choniates undermined the good standing and reputation of those who founded the dynasty. In Choniates's narrative the story of John's accession is sordid and full of perverse characters: men who let women rule them, women who want to rule, women who egg their husbands on to murder. The whole story is rife with sexualized vocabulary. It makes for a gripping and fitting opening chapter for his story of the Empire's decline. Because the story fits his thirteenth-century purposes so well, however, we must be cautious in accepting it as evidence for the events of 1118.²⁴

It seems hard not to think that Niketas was responding to Anna's history with his own. He never mentions her work, but it would be odd if he did not know of it. Neville has neatly demonstrated that Anna took her husband Nikephoros' depiction of Alexios as a trickster and turned it into a positive quality by showing the similarities to Odysseus. It seems possible that Niketas took the figure of Odysseus and showed the other side of the trickster.²⁵

It is also possible that Niketas is inverting Anna's history in his description of the succession, opening the history with this very domestic situation. In some sense Anna's history is a personal one since she described her own home, her family life and family history. One might say that he continues this, but offers a contrasting version of the way she ended her history. Having set the scene, he then moves on to the deathbed of the emperor, when succession became relevant. John consulted with his brother Isaakios who supported his claim to the throne. The readers would have been aware that this same brother would later fall out with John and be exiled by him. Plus the same brother, here presented as supporting the legitimate cause, when John died, would go on to support a challenger to the status quo. That is he supported John's son, Isaakios's claim to the throne over the younger Manuel, who was the choice of his father, the emperor. So although there seems to be some unity in the family, with at least the men pitted against the women in this early stage, the family will go on to split further and the readers would have been aware of this. John's behaviour is not presented in the best light. Niketas casts a doubt

into the reader's mind in the way he has written the scene by saying that he went to see his dying father and took his ring from his finger. Niketas adds

Some say that he did so at his father's behest, which seems to be borne out by what shall be described shortly.

(6)²⁶

In fact Niketas' own account so far had implied that Alexios wanted John to succeed, whereas there is nothing in what follows that would bear this out. Rather John is depicted as extremely unsure of his position by staying in the palace and not attending his father's funeral (8). This very statement from Niketas ('Some say that he did so at his father's behest' (6)) in fact did more to make the reader think that perhaps John had not acted honorably than anything else.

Niketas then tells the reader that the guards at the palace did not think the emperor's ring was enough and that John should have better proof of the emperor's wishes. This further makes the reader wonder about John's claim on the throne. His men simply remove the gates from their hinges and take the palace (7). Another problem was that Niketas then tells us that Alexios died the following night (8). Again one might think that the chronology of events at this stage was not entirely clear, although Anna for once agrees with the detail that John was in the palace before Alexios died (15.xi). Irene summoned her son to the funeral but he refused to go because, says Niketas, he feared for his position. So 'like an octopus clinging to the rock' he stayed in the palace although he allowed his relatives to attend the funeral (8). All of this seems very odd. Striking though is the way Niketas reports that Irene summoned her son, and the Greek puts her in the nominative case.²⁷ Again, for a woman, she acts decisively and with authority, even if at this point her son disobeys her.

Although the episode sets Anna's coup up, there is more about her mother than about her although when it failed, Niketas shines a light on Anna's feelings:

It is said that the Kaisarina Anna was so disgusted with her husband's frivolity that she considered herself as suffering something terrible and blamed nature most of all. Nature was placed under a grave indictment on the grounds that Anna's genitals were spread wide and hollowed whereas Bryennios had the long member and was balled.

(10)²⁸

This is an astonishing sentence for a historian. Whatever modern readers might think of it, the intention by Niketas must have been to create a

very negative image of her.²⁹ Niketas presents her as wishing she were a man, a woman with masculine ambitions. She was a member of the imperial family, well-educated and cultured, and yet Niketas places these crude thoughts in her head. Her mother also does not receive a positive portrayal as we have seen and quite apart from this, she is also shown as inconsistent. From being completely behind Anna and Bryennios before Alexios' death, we are told that she had no part in the plot, and again direct speech is put into her mouth which effectively condemns Anna's actions. Her words are:

The anguish I would have suffered, thanks to what these butchers [σφαγῆς] were planning for my son, would surely have been sharper than the pains I experienced in giving birth, for they thrust the infant into the light of day, while the former, penetrating my womb from the bowels of hell, would have caused me unending sorrow.

(12)

Although she appeared, according to Niketas, to have been the instigator of the ambition in her daughter, when her daughter tried to do something about it, she turned against her and called her a butcher. John, on the advice of his advisor John Axouch, was reconciled with his sister, although initially he had wished to give all her wealth to Axouch.³⁰

At the start of the history Niketas described how the emperor was unable to control his wife and daughter, and this lack of control of the female elements of the Komnene family sets the tone for the rest of the history. His narrative reveals the continual dearth of family loyalty, and the reversals of the normal course of events.³¹ The women behave unlike women – this in itself is a reversal in *taxis*, women wanting power, disobeying their menfolk, asserting themselves, and the contemporary reader might think, even writing history.

The city as a woman

When in 1199 the emperor Alexios III Angelos became ill and it seemed as if he might die, there was a consideration as to who might succeed him. Niketas runs through the options and then apostrophizes the City in a remarkable way:

O throne of the Romans, how celebrated and envied by all nations! Majesty adored, what violators have you endured! The insolent men that have risen up against you! The lovers that have gone mad over you! The admirers you have embraced! The wooers to whom you

have given yourself and showered with caresses and bound with the wreath and crowned with the diadem, and on whom you have tied the crimson buskins! Your sufferings are more heartrending than those of Penelope. In no way do you differ from a queen all – blessed, nobly beautiful, shapely and comely who is seized by the hands of shameless lovers whom the prudent deem worthless. Unaware of her majesty and disrespectful of her grandeur, they ignore her nobility and drag her away in lust, carrying her off to be ravished in an unlawful bed.

(498–499)

And he continues:

Oh what shameless acts you have endured and witnessed! A harlot's face has become for you something to celebrate and a cause of renown. Gone is your simple beauty, the modesty of your manner, and your temperate and chaste mode of life. Your face is heavily made up with cosmetics and paints, and you have been gotten ready for wanton pleasures and made over for licentious behaviour. They who have violated you have transformed your once beautiful, admirable and lovely form to that of a courtesan. When shall you lay aside this deformed beauty of your form, the unshapeliness of your figure, the affected look and gait? Who shall extricate you from the tyrannical embraces forced upon you and restore you to your former chaste behavior? But now we are in danger of turning pity into laughter, for it is not fitting that we should see you suffering such misfortunes and we cannot bear that you should abide in such disgraceful conduct. But so be it!

(499)³²

In some sense, this is a strange place to have this address, as the emperor recovered and the question of who would succeed him was irrelevant. Was the passage inserted here because this was the list of unsuitable candidates who were all that was available or would have been available had Alexios Angelos died then? The episode of Alexios III Angelos being ill is rather curious. His joints hurt and his feet 'would secrete virulent matter that gave rise to excruciating pain' (497). He burnt himself in order to counteract the pain. His doctors purged him and the medicines proved effective, says Niketas. He then goes on to narrate that Euphrosyne, Alexios' wife, wanted to make sure the successor would be favourable to her. Niketas points out that the emperor only had two daughters, both of whom were widows. There is no question that one of them might take over, or indeed that Euphrosyne might rule by herself, so the earlier idea of Anna ruling seems curious,

even the idea of viewing it like that. Niketas carries on to say that various choices were considered and comments:

No thought whatsoever was given as to who would be a worthy emperor of the Romans and an excellent administrator of public affairs and so infants at the breast and wrapped in swaddling clothes were picked by the dolts (ὕπὸ τῶν ἀβελτέρων) to rule.

(498)

This is also what had happened when Manuel died and his son was only young – then his son inherited because he was Manuel's son. In this later case there is some notion of choice. Niketas carries on to list those who sought the throne for themselves. In the end, the succession did not lie in Alexios' or Euphrosyne's hands, as he fled the city when the Latins attacked and his brother and brother's son took over. And at the end of the history, when narrating the attacks by the Latins there is a longer apostrophe, and in the middle of that there is also the likening of the city to a woman:

O prolific City once garbed in royal silk and purple and now filthy and squalid and heir to many evils, having need of true children! O City formerly enthroned on high, striding far and wide, magnificent in comeliness and more becoming in stature; now thy luxurious garments and elegant royal veils are rent and torn; thy flashing eye has grown dark, and thou art like unto an aged furnace woman all covered with soot, and thy formerly glistening and delightful countenance is now furrowed by loose wrinkles.

(577)³³

For Niketas then women are there to be admired for their beauty and their virtue, not to be actors in the historical drama. One can see that a city could be viewed in that way – a beautiful location to be inhabited. One might take this a little further when Niketas laments the destruction of the statues of Athena (558–589) and Helen (652).³⁴ Titos Papamastorakis has argued that we should take the *De Signis* (a work found at the end of two thirteenth-century manuscripts) as an extended metaphor relating to the taking of the city and the destruction of these priceless artefacts.³⁵ In this case, one can see that Niketas' description of those acts of destruction were ways of also describing the destruction of his city. The representations of beautiful women stood in for the city. In a similar vein, one might also view a couple of incidents in this light also, namely the killing of the wife

of the Hungarian nobleman (134–135), and Niketas' rescue of the young girl at the end. At the siege of Zevgminon, when the Byzantines scaled the walls at last, a rich nobleman with a beautiful wife, when he saw she was being dragged away by an enemy soldier, killed her himself. This action provokes one of Niketas' direct laments to the reader:

One of the inhabitants of this city, not a man of the rabble and vulgar mob but a rich and eminent nobleman, took pride in possessing a wife who was both graceful and very shapely. Seeing her being dragged away to be violated by one of the Roman soldiers and unable to protect her from being tyrannized, or to repel force by force and turn aside this iniquitous carnal passion, he resolved on an action that was more noble than daring and unlawful, but suited to the present fateful circumstances: he thrust his sword, which he carried with him, through the entrails of his beloved. Thus the irrational desire of the lawless lover who lusted madly after the woman was extinguished, since the cause was no more; and this truly wretched woman, who had been so passionately desired, was deprived of the gladdening light of life. Alas! How fateful the complexity of events and how vengeful and treacherous the Telchine who has produced such tragedies for the crowded theatre. O, two contrary loves contesting for the same prize. The one, reprehensible and the other, prudent; the one desiring the beloved for illicit intercourse and the other, confronted by shame, resolved in an unprecedented manner to kill her, and thereby to combat passion with passion!

(134–135)³⁶

Niketas pities the man who must kill his own wife, but praises him too for his noble action, saving his wife from shame. The woman is a prize that he does not allow the enemy to take, the enemy here being Niketas' own countryman. This is a story parallel to the tale Niketas tells about himself at the end of the work where he rescues a girl from the marauding westerners (590). According to Niketas' brother, in pleading for the girl the historian claimed she was his wife.³⁷ He saves her virtue, although the Romans were not able to save the virtue of their city and watched her burning and plundered. Here women are merely passive beings to be killed, or rescued, or taken like the city. Those women who are active tend to be the object of the author's condemnation. This is certainly the case of Euphrosyne who is perhaps the most active of all the women in the work, active in the worst sort of way: to acquire personal power for herself. She is discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

Womenly men

Being like a woman was a term of abuse for Niketas and, one assumes, his society. The captain of the Sicilians, who attacked Corinth in 1147, mocked Nikephoros Chalouphe for being a useless defender of Corinth:

At the same time he reproved and heaped abuse on the defenders for being ignoble in warfare, especially on Chalouphe whom he called more effeminate than a woman whose only skill was to spin wool in the women's apartments.

(75–76)³⁸

The start of the book about the second reign of Isaakios Angelos with his son Alexios starts in an ominous way. The previous book ended with the flight of the emperor Alexios, and Niketas chooses to start the next with a continuation of his judgement of that emperor:

Thus Alexios, driven away by no one, rode on to Develton. It is grievous for a wife and beloved consort to do harm instead of providing assistance, according to the maxim of an emperor who suffered greatly because of the advice of a female chamberlain.³⁹ But being a womanish man, [γύννις ἀνὴρ] it was a troublous matter and the worst thing possible, for what order given by him even though leading to grief and extreme danger, would not command obedience?

(549)

So worse than having a bad wife, which of course Alexios had had, was being a womanish man. Andronikos, when leading a life of debauchery, is described as effeminate (θηλυδρίας 244), and for women to be manly was also not good. Maria, the half-sister of the emperor Alexios Porphyrogenetos is presented very negatively:

Reckless and masculine in her resolution, [ἀνδρική τὸ φρόνημα οὔσα] by nature exceedingly jealous of her stepmother, and unable to endure that she had been bested and was held suspect as a rival, Maria dispatched letters to Andronikos prodding him like a horse at the starting gate anxious to run the race, delighting in the evil joy of her own making and bringing on her own ruin.

(230–231)

So although there is an apparently progressive start to the history, this is only the result of a modern distorting reading and Niketas does not hold

attitudes different from most men throughout most of history. And for him one of the symptoms of the decline was that the men were more like women and the women more like men.⁴⁰

Other imperial women

It is not even the case that it was enough for a woman to be virtuous for Niketas to praise her. One senses, among the condemnatory remarks about the emperor Manuel, some sympathy for his womanizing in the following description of his German wife:

The emperor took a wife from a distinguished and most illustrious German family. She was not so much concerned with physical beauty as with her inner beauty and the condition of her soul. Disdaining face powder, eye liner and eyeshadow underneath the eye, and rouge instead of nature's flush, and leaving these things to silly women, she was adorned by the virtues to which she was devoted. She had the unbending character of her nation and did not easily change her mind. Consequently the emperor was not very attentive to her, but she shared in the honors, bodyguard and remaining imperial splendors; in matters of the bed, however she was wronged.

(53–54)⁴¹

The description had started off favourably but Niketas includes the sentence that she was unbending and opinionated,⁴² and this does not seem unrelated to her apparently unusual disdain for the frivolities of beauty products. The way Niketas describes the situation of Manuel's incest here is that Manuel had sex with so many other women that he ended up having sex with a relative.

And he was blemished by this disfiguring and unseemly action as warts or pustules of dull white leprosy sprout on the face mar a lovely countenance.

(54)

However this vivid description is only about his incest, not all the many women he had sex with. And when his wife died, the reader would surely remember all the above when reading the dramatic outpouring of grief Manuel displayed:

When Manuel's German wife died, he grieved bitterly, looking upon her demise as if a limb had been torn from his body, and his lamentation

was like the roar of a lion. He honoured her remains with a magnificent burial, celebrating the funeral rites in the paternal monastery of the Pantokrator.

(115)

The reader with an average memory therefore would not be surprised that the very next sentence is:

But after concluding the prescribed period of mourning as if half-dead and sundered in twain, he contemplated a second marriage. . . .

(115)

The sentence concludes 'because he desired to hear himself called the father of a son' but even so, it would seem that the reader is deliberately being surprised by this husbandly grief (the only example in the history, although wives die quite frequently), only to be reassured by the punchline, so to speak.

For the most part, in the history, women are viewed as pawns in the political alliances between men.⁴³ So there are many instances of marriages arranged in order to secure convenient friendships, as with Isaakios Angelos' marriage with the nine-year old daughter of the king of Hungary (368). This king of Hungary, Bela III (also called Alexios) had been married to the daughter, Maria, of the emperor Manuel (170), but Manuel, after the birth of his son Alexios, separated his daughter from her Hungarian husband (originally the Hungarian Bela/Alexios had been going to succeed Manuel because Manuel had not had any sons by his first wife, the German Bertha (137)) and looked around for someone else to marry her to (170). Niketas describes the process thus:

The emperor once again carefully searched for a husband for his daughter. Making light of Roman nobles who were candidates for marriage, he carefully selected those dynasts of nations who were unmarried or those with sons who, following the death of their parents, would succeed to the paternal throne. The first place fell to William, king of Sicily. One envoy after another was sent to him, while he dispatched envoys back again to negotiate the marriage contract; the embassies alternated, and the preliminary wedding deliberations were drawn out in idle chatter. When these oscillated like a scale rising and falling and were frequently altered and modified, the emperor finally changed his mind, deeming a marriage with the king of Sicily to be disadvantageous to the Romans.

(170)

The daughter, Maria, marries the son of the Marquis of Montferrat, a youngster who

Was too young to grow a beard, while she [Maria] had passed her thirtieth year and was as strong as any man.

(171)⁴⁴

The process here is clearly described as being purely an arrangement between the men of the family, and later Niketas remarks that Manuel had enlisted as a friend the same Marquis of Monferrat by marrying his own daughter, Maria, to the marquis' younger son (200). Niketas comments on the inequality of ages as seen already. Another example of this is the marriage between Andronikos and Anna, the daughter of the king of France who had been married to Alexios, who himself had only been a child (276). Andronikos previously had wanted to marry his own daughter Irene, his illegitimate daughter by his niece Theodora, to Alexios (260). The marriage between Alexios and Anna was not recorded by Niketas until we hear that Andronikos married her himself. The description is rather gruesome:

And he who stank of the dark ages was not ashamed to lie unlawfully with his nephew's red-cheeked and tender spouse who had not yet completed her eleventh year, the overripe suitor⁴⁵ embracing the unripe maiden, the dotard the damsel with pointed breasts, the shriveled and languid old man the rose-fingered girl dripping with the dew of love.

(275/6)

Later there is a yet clearer description of how marriage was viewed in the imperial family when Niketas relates how the children of Isaakios Angelos fared.

Emperor Isaakios anchored the succession of his family on the three children begotten of his former marriages: two females and one male.

(419)

The older daughter was made a nun:

His second daughter he sent to wed the son of Tancred, the king of Sicily who had succeeded William after his death.

There is no shortage of instances of such political marriages.⁴⁶ One can also see that the role women play affects our reading of the characters of

their male partners. For instance the detail about Alexios Axouch's wife makes us even more sympathetic to the tragic fate of her husband. As Niketas presents it, the innocent Alexios Axouch was framed by the emperor Manuel and wrongly charged (144–145). He was arrested before dawn while still in bed with his wife (144). His wife, who was nobly born herself, being the

daughter of the porphyrogennetos Alexios, the first-born of Manuel's brothers, and among womankind the prize of peerless beauty, a radiant ornament spoken of by all with deep affection, held wifely affection and discretion in high esteem and attempted to kill herself at this.

(145)

She fails in the attempt and later begs the emperor to forgive her husband, who was in any case blameless. She failed in this also, and Niketas describes her fate in a very colourful passage, no doubt intended to provoke pity in the reader:

Her life was given over to weeping like a modest turtle-dove, and she walked in circles through the house, moaning and wailing and lamenting her loneliness; consumed by excessive grief, she became deranged, wasting her life away for her two sons, in the end she died.

(145)⁴⁷

Her portrait emphasizes the sad lot of her husband, who was tonsured as a monk and sent to a monastery (144) – this could have been worse. People on the wrong side of emperors were more often blinded. But her portrait also reveals the depth of cruelty, and wrongdoing, on the part of the emperor Manuel, who not only has a loyal servant wrongly accused, but ignores the justified pleas of a virtuous member of his own family. As a female, the main reason she is praised by Niketas is for her loyalty to her husband.

There is a mention of a girl only to illustrate the debauchery of Skleros Seth, as well as the extraordinary power of peaches (148).⁴⁸ And when Stefan the king of the Serbs throws his wife out (Eudokia, daughter of Alexios Angelos), this shows the reader what sort of man he is (531). After some years of childbearing, Stefan turns against his wife and

Accused his wife of itching from scabby incontinence, while she charged him with being drunk from the appearance of the morning star, with not drinking water from his own water jars and with gorging himself with bread eaten in secret.

(531)⁴⁹

The husband however accused his wife of adultery and threw her out. Eudokia's father, upon hearing of her disgraceful treatment, sent her a throne, necklaces and imperial robes and welcomed his daughter home (532). However, not only does it show the reader what kind of man Stefan is, namely an uncultured barbarian, it also reveals the insult borne by the Romans by their neighbours, who are not afraid of repercussions from Constantinople.⁵⁰

The narrative concerning Andronikos involves several women, that is those individuals with whom he is involved romantically. We learn about Eudokia, the daughter of Andronikos, the brother of Manuel, with whom Andronikos had an affair (that is, he was having sex with his cousin's child as Niketas explains (104)). It was this Eudokia who was reported as being an unusual woman since she was not stupid as referred to above (105). She suggests that Andronikos dresses as a woman and escapes. He does not follow this advice but miraculously escapes anyway. Shortly after, though, he is captured and imprisoned. He disappears but his wife is imprisoned in his place (107). Andronikos was hiding in the prison at first and then when he finds her in his cell, has sex with her, making her pregnant with their son John, then he leaves her to her fate and escapes (107). Andronikos already had a son Manuel by her mentioned at 268, but this is the first time that Niketas tells the reader about this child.

While in Antioch Andronikos is described rather in the terms of Antony by Plutarch. He falls for Philippa, the daughter of Raymond of Poitiers and sister of his cousin Manuel's wife (139). There is a long description of his degenerate living, but then fearing imprisonment again, he abandons Philippa and has sex with Theodora, another relative (141). She was the daughter of his cousin, Isaakios, the brother of the emperor Manuel (141). Again he was in trouble with the emperor, so he fled this time taking Theodora with him (142). She bore him two children, Alexios and Irene (142). We meet Andronikos with Theodora later (226).

Euphrosyne

One woman, however, stands out in the history as being described at greatest length. It is the wife of Alexios Angelos, Euphrosyne, mentioned earlier.⁵¹ We meet her for the first time playing a very active political role. Alexios deposed his own brother, Isaakios, and then entered Constantinople.⁵² Niketas describes his succession thus:

The officials of the state had already declared for him, *his entry had been made ready by his wife Euphrosyne*, [καὶ πρὸς τῆς γυναικός

Εὐφροσύνης ἢ τούτου προητοίμαστο εἴσοδος] and at least a faction of the senate had happily accepted the outcome of events.
(455; my emphasis)

Niketas is making a definite point here. He depicts her actions as vital for this part of the proceedings. There can be only a negative view of this woman from the way he describes her, and this is indeed the way he goes on to write about her. He comments that the citizens did not rebel against this. He says:

When the citizens [τὸ τῆς πολιτείας αὐτὸν πλήρωμα] heard the proclamations they engaged in no seditious act but at first they remained calm and applauded the news, neither remonstrating nor being inflamed by righteous indignation [δικαίαν ὀργήν]⁵³ at being deprived by the troops of their customary right to elect the emperor.
(455)

This the first time we hear that the people have the right to elect the emperor and it is fair to say that this has not been the case so far, at least as Niketas has narrated the successions but then he says that some of the people, whom he terms trouble makers [τινὲς φιλοτάραχοι]

formed a cabal from among the artisans and the rabble [τῶν βαναύσων καὶ ξυγκλύδων]. They rallied around a certain Alexios Kontostephanos, a stargazer who had long been lying in wait for the throne, and proclaimed him emperor in the agora, crying out that they had had their fill of the Komnenoi [Isaak Angelos was the grandson of Alexios I] and no longer wished to be ruled by them.
(455–456)

So having said the people did not rebel, he then reports that they did and that they expressed themselves in terms similar to views Niketas himself expresses, namely that the Komnenes were bad for the empire.⁵⁴ Niketas seems disapproving of all concerned:

When Empress Euphrosyne had entered the Great Palace at great risk, those members of distinguished families who had escorted her recklessly attacked Kontostephanos rather than with prudence. The vulgar city mob was dispersed, and Kontostephanos was apprehended and thrown into prison.
(456)⁵⁵

Virtually every time she crops up in the narrative it is in a similarly important political role. As seen before, such behaviour was not considered seemly for women and she is condemned, sometimes obliquely, sometimes very directly by Niketas:

This emperor's wife was very manly in spirit and boasted of a natural sophist tongue, eloquent and honeyed. Most adept at prognosticating the future, she knew how to manage the present according to her own will and pleasure, and in everything else she was a monstrous evil. [τὰ ἄλλα κακὸν διωλύγιον]

(460)

This paragraph, which introduces the reader to her, continues in this vein:

I do not speak of the embellishments, and the squandering of the empire's substance in luxury, and the fact that, thanks to her happy nature she was able to prevail over her husband to alter established conventions and devise new ones (these things, however have no place in the history, and if they are improper for women, this is also true of empresses).

(460)

Not only did she behave in such an unnatural way, but she was seen to behave in this way and brought dishonour to the emperor.

By dishonouring the veil of modesty, she was hooted and whistled at and became a reproach to her husband. At first, everyone believed that he knew of her improprieties and was simply pretending to be ignorant of them, but from his actions later, when his wife's activities were disclosed, he clearly demonstrated that he was not ignorant of her effronteries.

(460)

Niketas carries on by claiming that she had equal power with her husband and they were like co-emperors, although in fact as he describes it, she seemed the more powerful:

Because the empress had overstepped the bounds and held in contempt the conventions of former Roman empresses the empire was divided into two dominions. It was not the emperor alone who issued commands as he chose; she gave orders with equal authority and often nullified

the emperor's decrees altering them to her liking. And whenever the emperor was about to receive in audience an important foreign embassy, two sumptuous thrones were set side by side. Sitting in council with the emperor, she presided dressed in splendid attire, her crown embellished with gems and translucent pearls and her neck adorned with costly small necklaces. At times they stood apart in other imperial buildings and appeared in turn, thus dividing their subjects between them. If at first, they made obeisance to the emperor, they would then move on to the empress and make an even greater prostration before her. Not a few of the emperor's blood relations, for whom the highest offices had been reserved, would draw nigh, and placing their shoulders like wooden beams under the splendid and lofty throne, elevated the empress.

(460–461)

Here we see not just a woman usurping powers that were not hers, but also a wife bringing her husband, and the office of emperor, into disrepute. Her behaviour is so outrageous that she is denounced by her own son-in-law Andronikos Kontostephanos and brother Basil Kamateros.⁵⁶

What this outrageous behaviour consisted of was her favouring Constantine Mesopotamites, who had been influential with the previous emperor Isaak Angelos (484). Niketas even reports a speech that her son-in-law, Andronikos Kontostephanos, and her brother, Basil Kamateros, made to the emperor about his wife.

Your wife, O Despot, with unveiled hand perpetrates the most loathsome acts, and as she betrays you, her husband, in the marriage bed as a wanton, we fear lest she soon instigate rebellion. The confidant with whom she rejoices licentiously to lie, she has likely chosen to become emperor and is bent upon achieving this end. It is necessary therefore that she be deprived of all power and divested of her great wealth. Her lover, whom you have officially adopted and whom, in transgression of the law, she has made her stud, must be removed forthwith, without delay, in order to bring an end to this defilement. The punishment of your iniquitous wife should be delayed until the time that, with God's help, you have concluded your present business and have returned to Constantinople.⁵⁷

(486)

The man accused of adultery with Euphrosyne was not Constantine Mesopotamites but someone hitherto unnamed in the history, that is Vatatzes, who was in Bithynia fighting against Alexios the Cilician.⁵⁸ The emperor had him beheaded. The head was brought to him and he kicked it and 'he

then addressed it in terms wholly unfit to be included in this history' (486). Euphrosyne was put in a convent (488) but was reinstated six months later, due to the efforts of those who had vilified her in the first place, says Niketas (489). Quite astonishingly, she resumed her former position according to Niketas:

In this way, she took over almost the complete administration of the empire.

(489)

We find this described later (519–520), and again she is described as being like a man.

He [the emperor] found his wife Euphrosyne in no way content with keeping within doors but playing the man against seditionists and demagogues These things would not have been held in contempt, nor would they have excited wonderment from afar, had they been bound by limitations, but the empress's mad delusions and excessive zeal led her to believe that by inquiring diligently into the future, she could vitiate and dispel impending misfortunes even as the sun dissolves black clouds.

(519)

She also seems to have been involved in some sort of magic rites, and Niketas says that she whipped a statue of Herakles and mutilated other statues.⁵⁹

Alexios fled without his wife or family, and settled for a while in Adrianople, and although Niketas clearly held him in contempt for this cowardly action he describes him as having been a mild emperor:

If it be exceedingly difficult for emperors not to cut down the ears of corn which overtop the rest, and not to leap brutally upon those who have offended them, then one could see that Alexios was rich in such a virtue.

(548)⁶⁰

Such gentleness is quite unusual for emperors in Niketas' history. One might think that here some criticism is intended, as one might interpret this as weakness on Alexios' part. The empress Euphrosyne was seized and her relatives were imprisoned. She ends up escaping with her daughters with the deposed Alexios Doukas. Alexios Doukas was in love with one of these, Eudokia, who had been married to Stefan, king of the Serbs. After Alexios Doukas, she is married to Sgouros, a man born in Nauplion who

tried to take Athens (which was defended by Michael Choniates (606)) and does take Thebes (608).

Alexios and Euphrosyne are eventually sent by the marquis Boniface of Montferrat to Halmyros (620). As Niketas describes it, the place was fitting, since its name means 'Place of Bitterness'. They are not allowed to stay there but instead are shipped off to the king of the Germans.⁶¹

The wretched emperor Alexios and his wife Euphrosyne were sent across the sea to the ruler of the Germans. Alas and alack! Such a novel and extraordinary thing was unheard-of among the Romans and such a spectacle had never been seen before!

(621)

After her husband is deposed, Euphrosyne simply becomes his wife with no further significant role. But up until that point, she was the most active of all the women mentioned in the history, and by far the one with the most space devoted to her. She is masculine and powerful, and takes every opportunity to exercise that power. She is unlike any woman in the book, and she is the last of any significance to appear in the history so that one cannot help but remember the dominant women who opened the narrative, the empress Irene and her daughter Anna Komnena.

In some ways they are similar to Euphrosyne, having the ambitions more appropriate to men and taking direct action to achieve those ambitions. But they are different from Euphrosyne in being thwarted in their hopes, Irene by her husband and Anna by her brother John. One could see this as demonstrating the state of the empire – at the time of the death of Alexios Komnenos, the emperor was stronger and in some kind of control of his womenfolk. By the end of his narrative, and on the eve of the attack on the city, the emperor was no longer able to control his wife and indeed let her run the state. The fault is not so much with the women, after all by their very nature they are not worth much. The fault is with their men who do not curb them adequately, just as they had not protected the empire properly.

Notes

- 1 Davis 2009:148.
- 2 The articles in Gouma-Peterson 2000 discuss different aspects of the role of women in Byzantine literary society at this time. See also Neville 2012:139–140. Garland 1999:180–224 gives an outline of the empresses of the period.
- 3 See Cooper 1992: 'Our initial premise is that Roman male discourse about female power served more often than not as a rhetorical strategy within competition for power among males themselves' (151).

- 4 ‘Stories and discussions of women in Late Roman texts have less to do with depicting the lives of women than with using those rhetorical statements to comment on the power of the men who stand in relation to those women’ (Neville 2012:142). Neville goes on to demonstrate that this is true of later periods too.
- 5 Τῷ ἀνακτι Ἀλεξίῳ τῷ Κομνηνῷ υἱεῖς τρεῖς καὶ θυγατέρες τέτταρες ἐγεγένηντο.
- 6 Ἡ δὲ μήτηρ καὶ βασιλὶς Εἰρήνη τῇ θυγατρὶ Ἀννῇ τὴν πᾶσαν ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου χαρίζομένη ροπὴν οὐκ ἀνίει παρὰ τῷ συλλέκτρῳ Ἀλεξίῳ τὸν υἱὸν Ἰωάννην ἐνδιαβάλλουσα, προπετὴ τοῦτον ἀποκαλοῦσα καὶ ὑγρὸν τὸν βίον παλίντροφόν τε τὸ ἔθος καὶ μηδαμῇ ὑγιές. See Neville 2012:20 and n.33 for a discussion of the precise meaning of the Greek at this point. See Neville 2016:91–112 for a discussion of the deathbed scene.
- 7 See Efthymiades 2009a:40–43 on Niketas’ use of speeches. Simpson has a section ‘The Fictitious Speech’ (2013:262–266), which label is not to contrast the fictitious with the truthful but to point out that this feature is one of classicizing historiography and a tool for Niketas for a variety of functions.
- 8 Efthymiades (2009a:42) says, à propos Asen’s speech about the Angeloi (466–467), ‘Following the classical model in this instance Choniates places his own criticism in the mouth of the enemy.’
- 9 ὦ γυναῖ, κοινῶνέ μοι λέχους καὶ βασιλείας, οὐ τὰ πρὸς χάριν παύση τῆς σῆς ὑποτιθεμένη μοι θυγατρός, ἁρμονίαν τε καὶ τάξιν ἐπιχειροῦσα λύειν ἐπαινετήν, ὥς εἴπερ θεοβλαβείας μετέσχηκας;
- 10 Kaldellis 2009:79–80. See also Catanzaro 2012 on *taxis* and its lack: ‘In Niketas’ thought the idea of τάξις comes first from a parallel between the pecking order in the Kingdom of Heaven and the hierarchical order in the earthly empire’ (224).
- 11 βάλ’ ἐς τύχην ἀγαθὴν.
- 12 My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge for this improvement of the translation. Neville (2012:21) translates the passage thus:

The whole of Rome would laugh out loud at me and conclude that I had lost my senses if I, who seized the Empire, not in a praiseworthy manner, but with the blood of compatriots and ways departing from Christian laws, when I need to find an heir for it, would banish the one from my loins and welcome in the one from Macedonia.
- 13 Neville 2012:21.
- 14 Κρυψίνους ὁ ἀνὴρ οὗτος καὶ σοφὸν ἡγούμενος αἰεὶ τό περίεργον, μηδὲ τὰ πολλὰ ἐξαγγελτικός τοῦ ποιητέου δεικνύμενος.
- 15 ὦ ἀνερ, καὶ ζῶν ψευδοσύναις παντοίαις ἐκέκασο ἀντιφθογγὸν τὴν γλωτταν πλουτῶν τοῖς νοήμασι, καὶ νῦν δὲ ὡσαύτως τοῦ βίου ἀπαλλαττόμενος ἀμεταπτῶτως ἔχεις οἷς καὶ πρῶν προσέκεισο.
- 16 See *Alexiad* 15.11 to end.
- 17 Laoiu 2000:6.
- 18 Macrides 2000:68, and gives the references to *Alexiad* 1.1.2, 8.2.3,6, 12.5, 15.1. See also Neville 2012:182–193 and Ljubarski 2000:169–185.
- 19 Καὶ τιθεμένη διὰ παντός ἀσχολίας πάσης ἀνώτερον σπούδασμα, πῶς μετὰ θοιτο τὴν γνώμην ὁ βασιλεὺς, ἣν εἶχεν ἐπ’ αὐτῷ κυρσάμενος.
- 20 Gouma-Peterson 2000a:112.
- 21 ἥτις δὴ τῆς τῶν ἐπιστημῶν πασῶν ἐπόχου φιλοσοφίας ἐδείκνυτο μέλημα καὶ πρὸς πᾶσαν ἐρρῦθμιστο μάθησιν.
- 22 The emperor Manuel fixed succession on his daughter, but this was because he had no son at the time (137).
- 23 ἦν γὰρ σώφρων ἡ γυνὴ καὶ τὴν ἐπιπρέπουσαν τῷ θήλει σιωπὴν τιθεμένη περὶ πολλοῦ, οὐ χάριν καὶ καλὴν ἐν γυναιξὶ κατωνόμαζεν ὁ πρὸς μητρὸς αὐτῇ θεῖος ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ Μανουὴλ καὶ οἷόν τι τῶν ἐκ γένους ὁσφράδιον.

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24 Neville 2012:22–23.

25 See Neville 2012:188–189. See also the later discussion of Andronikos.

26 Εἰσὶ δ' οἱ κατὰ γνώμην τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτὸν φασὶ τόδε πεποιηκέναι, ὥς δίδωσιν ἐννοεῖν ἅ μετὰ βραχὺ ῥηθισόμενα

27 κατὰ δὲ τήν ἑω εὐθὺς μεταστέλλεται ἡ μήτηρ τὸν Ἰωάννην

28 The passage as translated here is discussed by Neville 2012:22, Kaldellis 2007:249 and Hill 2000:58. Magoulas has translated it as: 'It is said that Kaisarissa Anna, disgusted with her husband's frivolous behaviour and distraught in her anger, and being a shrew by nature, felt justified in strongly contracting her vagina when Bryennios's penis entered deep inside her, thus causing him great pain' (10). Both convey Anna's anger.

29 Laiou 2000:1 introduces her thus:

The princess Anna Komnene, born to a reigning emperor and therefore in the purple room of the palace in Constantinople, has long captured the interest and imagination of scholars, as this book testifies. And, indeed, there are good reasons for the fascination. She was a strong and powerful lady. She was also highly intelligent and well educated; she has the distinction of being the only secular woman historian of the European Middle Ages, and a historian of the highest caliber.

30 The first time we meet a Turkish character in the pages of Niketas' history, we find that he is one of the most favourably described characters in the history. This is John Axouch, who is described early on in the reign of John Komnenos. Niketas introduces him as the emperor's favourite, and a highly influential figure at court (9–10). He was a Turk who had been captured by the western armies on their way to Palestine who regained Nicaea, and had been given as a gift to the emperor Alexios. He had been brought up in the imperial household, and being of the same age as John had always been a close friend. When John became emperor, Axouch was made grand domestic and was so important that members of the imperial family showed him great respect. Not only is he described as influential with the emperor, and Niketas goes on to show how the emperor listened to his advice, but Niketas makes a point of describing him in glowing terms: 'Not only were his hands skilled in war but they were also quick and agile in performing needed good works. Furthermore the nobility and liberality of his mind quite overshadowed his humble origins and made Axouch beloved by all' (7–8). It was Axouch who advised the emperor to have mercy on his sister who had organized a coup against him. After the thwarting of the uprising, John observed, 'How the natural order of things has been inverted for me! Kinsmen have become the enemy, and strangers friends; it is only proper for this reason to turn these treasures over to friends' (11). This sentiment illustrates one theme of Niketas' book, that is the treachery of family and his history highlights the problems caused by this lack of solidarity where one would most expect it. One would expect a sister to be loyal but have fewer expectations of someone who had been a prisoner of war. The emperor then, to illustrate his gratitude to Axouch, had wanted to give his sister's possessions to him. The latter however advised him to restore them to his sister because she was family. 'They are more rightly hers than mine, being a paternal inheritance bequeathed to offspring' (11). The advice itself demonstrates Axouch's upright character and in case the reader had not quite understood, Niketas makes it explicit by putting the following words into John's mouth: 'I should be unworthy to rule should you be deemed more merciful than I towards my family and more above the temptation of excessive and easy gain' (11). And Niketas ends saying that John was reconciled with his sister (11). The relatively detailed depiction of John Axouch is perhaps in order to draw a contrast between him and the emperor, although generally John Komnenos receives a positive description from Niketas. Nevertheless, he is taught a lesson in loyalty by one from whom one would have least reason to expect loyalty. For a very detailed and careful study of the language of Niketas when discussing Axouch, see Maisano 1997.

- 31 Kaldellis 2009:81: 'The overturning of nature and *taxis* on the level of history elicited from Niketas a complementary overturning of textual *taxis*.'
- 32 My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge for the improved translation. Van Dieten notes the similarities to Jeremiah 3 in this passage (3.6 runs, 'Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there.'), but there is also an echo of Isaiah 1.21:

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her – but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts.

See also Lamentations 1.1–2:

How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal. She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has no one to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they have become her enemies.

See Appendix 1.

- 33 Van Dieten notes three references to the *Odyssey* in this passage: 11.539, about the soul of Achilles striding back to the meadow of asphodel after hearing about his son's valour from Odysseus; 5.217, Odysseus says to Circe that he knows his Penelope's looks and stature are insignificant compared to Circe's; 18.27, a beggar says about Odysseus that he talks glibly like an old hag at the oven (notes 1535, 1536, 1537 on p. 406).
- 34 Discussed by Laiou 1991:80 in her comments on Niketas and his attitude to foreigners.
- 35 Papamastorakis 2009.
- 36 Discussed by Simpson 2013:269, who argues that the narrative function, which was to arouse feelings of pity and horror in the reader, was more important than its accuracy. She concludes (270) that Niketas digressed like this in order to entertain or instruct his reader. I would suggest as an addition to this that we can also see some symbolic role being played by the woman. Niketas is also showing us how one 'should' act, and that one should destroy one's love rather than let her be raped, as Constantinople had been.
- 37 Discussed by Magoulias 1984:xxviii.
- 38 Ὅν καὶ γυναῖκας ὠνόμαζε μαλακώτερον μηδὲν ἐπισταμένης πλέον τῆς ταλασίουργού γυναικωνίτιδος.
- 39 Magoulias has a note for this saying 'source unknown'. It is perhaps worth noting that one could say that from Niketas' description (5–8) of Alexios I Komnenos' deathbed, that he also had suffered from the bad behaviour of his wife.
- 40 As Neville observed 2012:17:

In both Zonaras and Choniates the actions of the women in the imperial family serve, at least in part, to create a gendered critique of the imperial men. The narratives of Zonaras and Choniates either question or entirely undermine the masculinity of Alexios, John and Nikephoros.

- 41 My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge for the improved translation.
- 42 εἶχε δὲ τὸ μὴ ἐπικλινέειν ἐθνικὸν καὶ τὸ τῆς γνώμης ἐκείτῃ δυσμετάθετον
- 43 See Laiou 1991:91–95 on political marriages.
- 44 ἀνδρική τυγχάνουσα τὴν ἰσχύν
- 45 Andronikos was about 65 years old.
- 46 See for example, the marriage of Eudokia, daughter of Alexios Angelos, to Stefan, one of the sons of the king of the Serbs, who later became king himself (531), discussed on the next page.
- 47 My thanks to the anonymous reader for Routledge for comments on the translation.

- 48 ‘Skleros had passionately desired a nubile virgin and made a vigorous attempt on her honor but was rebuffed and held in contempt by the maiden. He then sent her a peach by way of a procuress. The virgin, concealing it in her bosom, was driven mad with passion and consumed by an insane lust, and in the end she was deflowered by him.’ (148).
- 49 Magoulas 1984 explains in note 1428 that this means he had lots of affairs.
- 50 Eudokia later married Alexios Doukas and finally Sgouros (608–609).
- 51 Discussed by Simpson 2013:202–204. She is generous towards Niketas:

Since Niketas is our only source for these events, we must perforce take him at his word. . . . In all, Euphrosyne comes across as one of the most menacing personages in the *History*: an overambitious, domineering and amoral woman who presided over a decadent political system. Undoubtedly there is a conservative element linked to gender-specific roles in Niketas’ condemnation of the empress-consort. The historian was very aware of the proper limitations and appropriate behavior for an empress-consort and Euphrosyne had clearly overstepped these bounds. But gender only plays a secondary role in the historian’s interpretation. Like Alexios the *protosebastos*, Euphrosyne had unofficially usurped power and aroused opposition among other members of the family. In both cases, sexual misconduct was involved, but more important was the quest for political power, which in one case led to civil war and in the other to a disgraceful scandal. (204)

- 52 Niketas comments directly on the action of Alexios – the idea that he had deposed his own brother – the extreme of family disunity where one cannot trust one’s own family.
- 53 Niketas’ use of the adjective *δικαίαν* shows that he thought they *should* have rebelled.
- 54 This passage was quoted earlier, in Chapter 2:

It was the Komnenos family that was the major cause of the destruction of the empire; because of their ambitions and their rebellions, she suffered the subjugation of provinces and cities and finally fell to her knees. These Komnenoi who sojourned among the barbarian nations hostile to the Romans, were the utter ruin of their country and whenever they attempted to seize and hold sway over our public affairs, they were the most inept, unfit and stupid of men. (529)

- 55 τῆς δὲ βασιλίδος Εὐφροσύνης ἐπικινδύνως οὕτω τὸ μέγα παλάτιον εἰσιούσης καὶ τῶν ἀπ’ εὐσήμεου γένους ἐκείνῃ ἐφεπομένων κατὰ τοῦ Κοντοστεφάνου ἐξορησάντων τολμηρώτερον μᾶλλον ἢ συνετώτερον, τό τε χυδαῖζον τῆς πόλεως διασκίδναται καὶ ὁ Κοντοστέφανος συλληφθεὶς φρουρᾷ παραδίδεται.
- 56 Simpson 2013:26–31 is excellent on how names were added to the manuscripts containing fuller versions of the history to critical accounts of individuals, among them the Kamateroi. She shows how Niketas was free later to name members of this powerful family for wrong doing, and also suggests that Niketas was angry with Basil Kamateros for not helping him more in his exile (p. 31). Magdalino had also pointed to the negative portrayal of members of this family by Niketas (1993:255–256), in his discussion of the striking episode in Manuel’s reign when Niketas tells how Styppieotes is destroyed by one of the Kamateros family (see also Magdalino’s earlier discussion pp. 198–200). Theodore Styppieotes was a confidante of the emperor Manuel Komnenos. Niketas tells us how this good man was wrongly accused of treachery and comments: ‘I insert these events into my history to show my readers how unreasonable a thing wickedness is and how difficult it is to guard against it. It is necessary, as far as it is possible, to suspect all rivals in power’ (111). And he goes on to illustrate this. Styppieotes was plotted against by a jealous rival and the emperor was turned against him. The rival Kamateros had planted a forged letter to the King of Sicily in Styppieotes’ tent and Niketas writes:

After concealing the letter among Styppieotes’ documents and letters he convinced the emperor to send agents to search Styppieotes’ tent for the letter. When

the charge was confirmed, the emperor's rage against the man flashed like lightning in the sky. Styppeiotēs' pupils were forthwith destroyed and he was unjustly blinded, never again to see the sun. (113)

The next sentence, which can sound rather flippant, because after talking about blinding, it seems odd to invoke the eye of justice, is: 'O unerring eye of Justice that sees all things, how is it that thou dost often overlook such transgressions and even other more wicked deeds of men?' (113). And after commenting on the jealous Kamateros framing the innocent and virtuous Styppeiotēs, Niketas generalises about power, that one must be always on one's guard. He says:

It is necessary, as far as is possible, to suspect all rivals in power who are not open in their manner and mean the opposite in their heart. . . . Kamateros was unable to endure Styppeiotēs' good fortune. He envied him his decisive influence on the emperor and his freedom to approach the emperor at all times. . . . Subject even in his dreams to the envy which gnawed at the very cockles of his heart, Kamateros devised the greatest mischief against the man. Skillful in hatching plots and possessed of a forked tongue like the slanderous serpent, the originator of evil, he feigned a friendship with Styppeiotēs, thus concealing his evil deliberations with the appearance of good intentions and anointing the lip of the cup of poison with the honey of love. Saying one thing and meaning another, and honouring him with his lips while his heart was far from him, he took in the simple and naïve Styppeiotēs. (111–112)

- 57 Niketas had introduced the speech saying that the emperor was just about to set out for the western regions (485).
58 There were several Vatatzes in the history but no other name is given with this man and it is not certain which he was. The Cilician Alexios is described earlier (461–463) as an individual who had appeared claiming to be Manuel's son Alexios.
59 Papamastorakis argues that Niketas uses destruction of statues to demonstrate senseless and self-destructive action:

But more than this, the description of the antique masterpieces destroyed by the Crusaders in Constantinople at the end of LO [De Signis] is an intentional and carefully considered counterweight to the description at the beginning of LO of the statue of Athena which was destroyed by the Constantinopolitan mob. By means of this corresponding arrangement Choniates created a sort of metaphor whereby he equated the actions of the Byzantine populace and their emperors with those of the Crusader armies and their leaders. (2009:217)

Papamastorakis does not discuss Euphrosyne's actions but they support his argument.

- 60 Having said that however, this same Alexios, the father of Eudokia, had Alexios Doukas blinded although by then neither of them was on the throne (608).
61 In 1211 Theodore Laskaris had Alexios confined to a monastery in Nicaea where he died. See Macrides 2007:79–81 for accounts of Alexios' movements after his flight from Constantinople.

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4 Hellenism and classicism in the *History*

Introduction

We all are accustomed to considering Niketas as the historian *par excellence*, the author, as Alexander Kazhdan wrote of ‘one of the most important historical works of the Middle Ages’, the statesman who held the highest public offices, the court orator and the polished and mannered writer, who took special delight in showing off his exquisite classical culture.¹

Thus Luciano Bossina sums up the usual characterization of Niketas Choniates. And Alicia Simpson describes him thusly:

As a historian, Niketas no doubt belongs to the group of elite ‘classicizing’ Byzantine historians who continued each other’s work and wrote from within the confines of the imperial court.²

His history records the military and political events during the reigns of the emperors in the century leading up to the fall of Constantinople in 1204. The work is ‘replete with classical cultural references’, and the author uses abstruse vocabulary so that one might conjecture a limited readership.³ One would think that the number of classical references and the less apparent biblical ones render this easy to categorise as a classicizing history.⁴ In this chapter I want to examine this label, to see how Niketas used the ancient world in his history and what he wanted to convey to his readers. There are references to classical authors, to the pagan gods, to mythological figures and to Homer, as well as to personifications of time and fortune which were typical in classical times.

Roger Scott observed of Anna Komnene:

The classicist who begins to read Anna Komnene’s *Alexiad* ought to be quickly aware of three simple facts. The first is Anna’s claim that she has an excellent knowledge of the classics. The second is the

presence of some of the more distinctive features of the classical historians such as the carefully worked preface, the formal speeches, the learned digressions and the apparently stress on *tyche*, chance or fate, an important factor in causation.⁵

The *Alexiad* is a very different work from Niketas' history, but there are common features. Niketas too has a carefully worked preface, and in his case the preface indicates the predilection for classical references.⁶ The first paragraph of the preface refers to Hades and the next to Tithonos.⁷ A few lines down there is an echo of Euripides' play, *Orestes*.⁸ A little later there is mention of Ares (p. 3 line 54). It is also perhaps worth mentioning that the preface makes no mention of God or Christ or any biblical figure.

As an introduction, in its use of classical allusions, the preface does give a good indication of the work as a whole. The rest of the history also consists much more of references to the mythological past than to subjects of classical historiography.⁹ One might have expected the reverse to be true, since Niketas is writing a historical work, but the author was not concerned to draw parallels with Greek historians like Thucydides or Herodotus, nor Latin authors such as Livy or Tacitus.¹⁰ In this he is also like Anna Komnene. After the sentences quoted earlier, Scott went on to say:

The third fact is that Anna's history, despite the use of classical motifs, is still a different kind of history from that written by Thucydides or any other surviving classical historian.¹¹

Throughout, Niketas seems concerned much more to add a Homeric gloss to his writing, perhaps one might say to give it a heroic aura, or perhaps a poetic one, than to show off his knowledge of the ancient historians.¹² There are for instance accounts of the remarkable feats by giant warriors (e.g. 414–415, 569–570), Andronikos' miraculous escape from the tent (104–105) or even God's intervention to change the attitude of the sultan might seem Homeric (188).¹³ Niketas even seems to have based a whole character, the maverick and wily Andronikos, on that of Odysseus.¹⁴ Andronikos' escapades seem to have been included to provide light relief at times. He is cunning, a trickster figure, who has various liaisons with women. At one point, because of the rather detailed description of his foppish ways and luxuriant living in Antioch, it is almost as if there is in Niketas' mind a picture of Antony and Cleopatra, except that Philippa is no Cleopatra and there is no tragic ending to the love story (139).¹⁵ Philippa is given several mythological allusions:

Not many days elapsed before Andronikos reckoned the slaughter of men, battles and warfare, the war trumpet and Terror, Rout and Ares, who is the bane of mortals, as secondary and incidental. Setting aside the deeds of war, he gave himself over to the orgiastic rites of Aphrodite. The goddess did not put forward a Helen, nor did she present any such who exercised dominion throughout Hellas and mid-Argos, suffuse her with beauty, drive her mad with passionate love and build ships and install Pherekles as captain. She described instead from among his neighbours, the comeliness of Philippa and seduced Andronikos. Andronikos, notorious for being love smitten, laid down his shield, removed his helmet, completely doffed his military attire, and deserted to his inamorata in Antioch. Making his way thither, he preferred the joys of the Erotes to the armaments of Ares, though he did not card wool or devote himself to the loom and twist the distaff for Philippa, as did Herakles when he served Omphale as her slave.¹⁶
(138–139)

Philippa was then wooed by Constantine Kalamanos, whom Manuel had sent to get her away from Andronikos (140). Philippa however was not interested in him, and Niketas carries on with his classical references to repeat what he had said clearly in the paragraph preceding this:

When Constantine saw that he was held in low esteem by Philippa's Erotes, who fluttered their wings towards another, pelting Andronikos with apples and carrying torches he departed and went to Tarsus.
(140)

However many echoes of Plutarch's Antony and Cleopatra one might see here, Niketas only refers directly to Demetrius, the Greek whom Plutarch paired with Antony in his *Parallel Lives*, and Lamia when Andronikos escapes again, this time from the palace of Meloudion to the Great Palace (347). Niketas observes that Andronikos took with him his wife, Anna, but also his mistress, Maraptike, for whom, we are told:

he had a most ardent and passionate love¹⁷ – greater even than that of Demetrius Poliorcetes of ancient times for Lamia, whom Ptolemy took captive when campaigning in Cyprus and who played the flute quite tolerably.
(347)

Here Niketas gives a resume of Plutarch's chapter 16 about when Demetrius first met Lamia, perhaps reminding the reader of what else Plutarch

had said. Plutarch describes how Ptolemy's property fell into Demetrius' hands. He says:

Among these prizes of war was the celebrated Lamia, who had first won fame for her skill as a flute-player.

But Plutarch also goes on to say:

and had later become renowned as a courtesan. By this time her beauty was on the wane and Demetrius was many years her junior: in spite of this her charm took possession of him to such an extent that although many other women had a passion for him, he had no passion save for her.

(Life of Demetrius 16)

So Niketas is careful to point out that he is not comparing Maraptike to Cleopatra, a regal, intelligent, beautiful and learned queen, but Lamia, an ageing courtesan.¹⁸

Another passage where a reader might appreciate Niketas' classical education is perhaps where the empress Euphrosyne has statues whipped and mutilated (519).¹⁹ Euphrosyne, because she had a weak husband, was assuming charge of the empire and this is one of the many actions Niketas describes her as taking, presumably to illustrate the illogicality of women or her superstition, since

in her predictions of things to come, she devoted herself to unspeakable rituals and divinations and practised many abominable rites.

(519)

The details of her having statues mutilated and flogged reads most oddly and presents the empress as demented:

She went so far as to cut off the snout of the bronze Kalydonian boar that stands in the Hippodrome with its back bristling and advances with projecting tusks against a lion.

(519)²⁰

Euphrosyne not only attacked this statue:

she conceived of having the back of the gloriously triumphant Herakles, Lysimachus' most beautiful work, in which the hero holds his head

in his hand and bewails his fate while a lion's skin is spread out over a basket, lacerated by repeated floggings.

(519)²¹

Gods

Niketas then addresses Herakles directly as if to draw attention to this strange action. The direct comments Niketas makes in his work are one of the aspects that make it unlike its ancient counterparts.²² Sometimes they seem to be telling the reader what to think, but at times it is as if the author uses them to surprise the reader.²³ Here however the address seems to be to underline his condemnation of Euphrosyne's action:

O Herakles, brave and greathearted hero, the absurdity and folly of those things dared against you. Did a Eurystheus ever propose such a task for you? Did an Omphale, in flame of amours and lascivious wench, treat you so disdainfully?

(520)²⁴

These were not the only statues she attacked, as Niketas goes on to inform us:

In addition to these shameful deeds, she removed limbs from other statues and beheaded some with hammer blows.

(520)

A few pages later, in fact just after telling us about Isaakios moving the boar to the palace, Niketas reports that the Constantinopolitan people also behaved in the same irrational, or perhaps merely ignorant, way as Euphrosyne:

The wine-bibbing portion of the vulgar masses smashed the statue of Athena that stood on a pedestal in the forum of Constantine for it appeared to the foolish rabble that she was beckoning the western armies.

(558)²⁵

Both of these episodes illustrate ignorance. In the case of the mob, Niketas explains that Athena was not even facing west. He goes on to say what Athena represented to the city:

As a result of such misconceptions, they shattered the statue of Athena or, rather, guilty of ever-worsening conduct and taking up arms against

themselves they discarded the patroness of manliness and wisdom even though she was but a symbol of these.

(558)²⁶

This rather appears to contradict the remark made earlier about the icon of Mary in Manuel's triumph, namely that:

The axle did not creak loudly for it did not carry the dreadful goddess, the pseudo virgin Athena, but the true Virgin.

(158)²⁷

One might say that here, almost paradoxically, Niketas is bringing in his Homeric reference, in spite of its sense, to classicise this Christian event.

Niketas' description of the destruction by the Crusaders of the ancient works of art has been argued by Papamastorakis to show that Niketas thought his city's beauty was due more to its classical monuments than its Christian churches.²⁸ It is curious that this section of Niketas' work does only describe these works, and Papamastorakis is certainly correct to draw attention to Niketas' judgement on the mutual destruction of both sides in the paragraph that ends the work.²⁹ But Niketas had already described the desecration of holy places committed by the Crusaders when describing the taking of the city, see for instance 573–582.³⁰

As well as mentioning Athena, Niketas compares the Angeloi brothers to the Dioskouroi. He says

His brother [Alexios] ascended the throne peacefully and without factional strife, and the two could be compared to the Dioskouroi who agreed to set and rise on alternate days in the firmament of the empire.

(452)³¹

Not for the first time, one cannot believe that Niketas is being serious here as Alexios had just overthrown his brother and at the start of the next book, Niketas adds that Alexios also had his brother blinded (453). He also comments that

Alexios, now on the throne, never realized that he had overthrown himself by deposing his brother.

(454)³²

Niketas introduces Aphrodite and Ares more than once. Niketas compares a mock battle of Byzantines and westerners, which took place in Antioch

during the reign of Manuel, to sex between these two gods (109), which is an unexpected simile. There is mention of Ares as an urger on to war,

Ares raged furiously and lusting after bloodshed, incited the armed warriors, especially the Venetians and neither restrained any of the fight nor coerced any to turn back.

(85)

And a few pages later, he says of John Doukas that he was a man of Hermes and a man of Ares ἐρμᾱϊκός καὶ ἀρᾱϊκός (94). Magoulias renders this skillfully as ‘a man both mercurial and martial’ (55), although because English uses the Latin names to make adjectives, the Greek nature of Niketas’ text is missed.

Aphrodite is also referred to obliquely when describing the attack by the Sicilians on Monemvasia, after easily taking Kerkyra. Those at Monemvasia however did not immediately capitulate, and Niketas describes them as

men governed by the intellect, who, not ignorant of the Paphian goddess of freedom, repulsed him.

(73)³³

Presumably it was Monemvasia’s proximity to Cythera that made Niketas think of Aphrodite, though he refers to her with her Cypriot epithet.³⁴ Aphrodite is mentioned a little later when there is an extended description of Manuel’s second wife, who unlike his first, was beautiful. She was also the daughter of Raymond of Poitiers.

The woman was fair in form and exceedingly beautiful; her beauty was incomparable. In a word, she was like unto the laughter-loving, golden Aphrodite, the white-armed and ox-eyed Hera, the long-necked and beautiful-ankled Laconian [Helen] whom the gods deified for their beauty and all the rest of the beauties whose good looks have been preserved in distinguished books and histories.

(116)

Not only does Niketas say her beauty was incomparable (ἀξύμβλητος) and then compare her to three different female characters, but he also seems to be concluding that all beautiful women look the same. This woman looks not only like Aphrodite, but also Hera and Helen ‘and all the rest of the beauties’. One might be inclined to think that Niketas is not being entirely serious in this description.

Later in the book, Manuel's daughter is compared to Electra. One realizes that this is not a very complimentary comparison quite quickly:

The maiden, a princess wooed by many, was like Agamemnon's daughter Electra, raving long in the palace and stately as a white poplar, wet with dew, longing for the marriage bed.

(170–171)

Niketas goes on with this sketch and tells the reader that she married someone much younger than herself, a son, Renier, of the Marquis of Montferrat,

who was fair of face and pleasant to look upon; his well-groomed hair shone like the sun and he was too young to grow a beard, while she had passed her thirtieth year and was as strong as a man.

(171)³⁵

This is a curious comparison. Maria, Manuel's daughter, does not emerge in a glamorous light unlike her aforementioned stepmother, who was compared to the most beautiful goddesses and Helen of Troy. After her father Manuel died in 1180, Maria rebelled against her stepmother, the empress, also called Maria, who was ruling for her young son, Alexios. Electra had, along with her brother, plotted to take revenge for their father's murder on her mother and stepfather. Maria's revolt failed and she died, thought by poison, when Andronikos came to the throne (259–260).

Homer

The classical author that Niketas, like Anna Komnene, most often cited or alluded to, is Homer, as mentioned earlier.³⁶ A glance at van Dieten's index locorum reveals this very clearly.³⁷ He is frequently returned to either by name or by verbal echo or direct quotation. About Manuel, Niketas observes:

The emperor in idle occupation without purpose, became restless and did not wish to waste his days to no benefit, as happened in former times with Odysseus, the king of the Kephallenions in the matter of the oxen belonging to Helios, so he boarded the flagship and reconnoitred the entire island of Kerkyra.

(82)³⁸

Elsewhere he names Homer directly, such as when describing the Sicilians preparing to attack Acrocorinth,

Within [the walled acropolis] were several small wells of potable and limpid water, as well as the Pirene spring made famous by Homer in his epic poetry.

(75)³⁹

His description of Roman⁴⁰ archers in Kerkyra (87) echoes Homer's description of Pandaros, the son of Lycaon, aiming at Menelaus and thus destroying the chance of a truce with the Greeks.⁴¹ This could be mere chance but the situation for the Romans was difficult, and from the description the reader is given the impression that Niketas thought Manuel should have reached an agreement with the Latins since they were holding out so successfully in Kerkyra against the attackers. In fact the Latins did eventually make overtures for peace to the Byzantines, so it seems that Niketas' description was not entirely accurate.⁴²

About a battle with the Hungarians, Niketas says

It was a battle out of Homer that day, 'buckler pressed on buckler, helm on helm, and man on man,' the horses were head to head, 'the battle that brings death to mortals, bristled with spears' and the armies swayed back and forth, like an undulating serpent rattling its scales.

(156)⁴³

Isaakios Angelos, before he became emperor, is compared to Aeneas (284), and at last one might think that we have something from the Latin tradition, but it does not seem to be. Niketas says

He [Isaakios] was irresolute and like Aeneas, stood aloof from the contest.

(284)

This seems to be a reference to the *Iliad* 20.325, however, rather than to anything Virgil wrote.⁴⁴ The passage in the *Iliad* is where Poseidon lifts Aeneas out of the battle and away from Achilles. There is no notion that Aeneas is the founder of the Roman people, nor is any reference like this implied, especially since Isaakios Angelos is not depicted in a favourable light. At this point, where Niketas compares him to Aeneas, he is saying that the Nicaeans having lost their champion, Theodore Kantakouzenos, who had just been killed, looked to Isaakios Angelos, but the latter, Niketas tells us, was irresolute.⁴⁵ He negotiated with the Romans under Andronikos and Niketas says that as a result

the zeal of the troops gradually diminished and their noble and inspired elan was snuffed out.

(284)

Personifications

Another aspect of Niketas' history which would seem to owe something to his classical predecessors is his use of abstract concepts. For instance, time is personified:

Time which wastes and plunders all things, had not yet softened the emperor's sorrow over it when another lamentable misfortune, worse than the first, compounded the evil.

(85)

And earlier in the work, Fortune also was introduced as playing a role in human affairs. Niketas wrote that Fortune (τύχη) favoured Styppaiotes (59), having abandoned John Hagiotheodorites, although in turn she abandons Styppaiotes, and at 111 we read that Envy (φθόνος) did not allow Styppaiotes to maintain his position.⁴⁶ The latter came to a bad end because Manuel was jealous of him, according to Niketas. Manuel himself also suffered in Sicily:

But Fortune did not smile genuinely upon their brave deeds in battle, and the emperor was not to rejoice at the good news, as was fitting, for the king gathered an even greater force, collecting a number of mercenary troops, and renewed the fight. . . . And, now, when Fortune treated him [Manuel] unfairly, he hotly contended with her and struck back.

(95)

Classical historians

There are few references to episodes in ancient history (rather than mythology), but one example is in the reign of Manuel when Niketas, as an eyewitness, compares the bones of the Turks after the battle in Phrygia as being like the bones of the Cimbri which the locals used as fences for vineyards in Marseilles.

All those who come this way are amazed by what they see, as was I, the recorder of these events. The vastness of the circuit of the fences enclosing the vineyards of the Massilians, fashioned from the bones of the Cimbri when the Roman Marius had crushed the barbarians would clearly be comprehended by all those who had viewed this unusual deed and reported it to others.

(71)⁴⁷

Niketas goes on to say that the Roman battle against the Turks was greater than Marius' really, but that Marius' achievement had been mythologized by writers:

Indeed what happened here would have surpassed the earlier battle were it not for the grandiloquent account recording the fate of the Cimbri that exaggerated nature sinking all into myth.

(71)

Presumably he has Plutarch's description in mind, which would seem to fit Niketas' criticism:

Other authors give different accounts both of the division of the spoils and of the numbers killed. None the less it is said that the people of Marseille fenced their vineyards round with the bones and that the soil where the dead bodies, soaked in the rain which fell throughout the winter, had rotted away was fertilized to a considerable depth by the putrified matter and became so rich that it yielded in future years quite extraordinary harvests, thus justifying the saying of Archilochus that 'in such ways the fields are fattened.'

(Plutarch, *Life of Marius* 21)⁴⁸

Again from history rather than Homer, there is a reference to a character in Herodotus, that is Xerxes' helmsman, to illustrate the reversal of fortune when Andronikos was in charge:

On one and the same day, one would often see the same man, like Xerxes' helmsman, both crowned and butchered, praised and cursed.

(259)

The paragraph where Niketas makes this comment is as follows:

For these reasons therefore, the whole head was in pain and these works were performed in the open as though they could never be verified, like the monstrosities subtly contrived by Empedoclean Strife. It was not only every man of high degree and distinction of the opposing faction who suffered most piteously; he was also most unfaithful to his own attendants. But yesterday he had fed them the finest wheat and set before them the fatted calf and mingled stronger drink of the finest bouquet, including them in the circle of his closest friends; today he treated them in the worst way possible. On one and the same day, one would often see the same man, like Xerxes' helmsman, both crowned

and butchered, praised and cursed. Many who had sided with Andronikos, if they were at all perceptive, deemed praise from him to be a deliberate insult, the conferring of any human benefit the prelude to vomiting up one's possessions and a show of regard, certain ruin.
(259)⁴⁹

The mention of Empedoclean Strife appears to put this firmly in the classical tradition, and certainly Xerxes makes the reader think of Herodotus:

The moment Xerxes had gone ashore he presented the helmsman with a gold crown as a reward for saving the king's life, and then to punish him for causing the death of a number of Persians, cut off his head.
(*Histories* 8.118)

'The finest wheat' has echoes of Psalm 81.16–17, 'But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you'; 'the fatted calf' of Luke 15.23, 'Bring the fattened calf and kill it'; whereas 'mingle stronger drink' reminds us of *Iliad* 9.203: 'mingle stronger drink'.⁵⁰

The striking comment about the whole head being in pain echoes Isaiah 1.5–6:

Where will you be stricken again,
As you continue in your rebellion?
The whole head is sick
And the whole heart is faint.

From the sole of the foot even to the head
There is nothing sound in it,
Only bruises, welts and raw wounds,
Not pressed out or bandaged,
Nor softened with oil.⁵¹

This is one of a number of allusions to Isaiah which would seem a fitting book of the Bible for Niketas in his critical account of the empire.

Another unusually extended historical reference compares Isaakios to the Carthaginian Hanno:

The ill-omened rumor that was being bruited about concerning the emperor was superseded by another announcement proclaiming him victor, to which the emperor, in the manner of the Carthaginian Hanno gave wings and let fly over the cities. But neither did Hanno long delight in his collection of singing birds which had been taught one

phrase by striplings who sat patiently beside them and continually recited 'Hanno is a god.' After the birds had been released in all directions so that their song would be about him everywhere they no longer sang that Hanno was a god but warbled the melodies of birds as before. Nor did the emperor long enjoy the song of joyous tidings, for the loss of so many men filled the cities with wailing and the countryside with impassioned dirges.

(431)⁵²

There is also a remarkable episode recorded during the reign of Manuel, remarkable for its extremely hostile account of this emperor, and for the carefully detailed narrative at this point which might make many readers suspicious, since how did Niketas learn this? After the disastrous battle of Myriokephalon there is a series of episodes, all reflecting badly on Manuel. One is:

Before joining up with them [troops who had gone on ahead], he [Manuel] had been overcome by thirst while still in the region of the stream mentioned above, and he asked one of the men standing nearby to fill a pitcher with water and to bring it to him to drink. Taking only so much of the water as to wet his palate, he poured out the rest so that he should not experience the pleasure of the liquid passing down his throat. The drinking water, he saw on close inspection was defiled by gore; he wailed aloud and said that fortunately he had not tasted of the blood of Christians. A certain man standing nearby who showed himself to be rash and impudent, more unpleasant than these troubled times, unblushingly commented: 'Get along with you, O Emperor, this is certainly not so, oh no! This is not the first time; often in the past you have drunk unto intoxication from a wholly unmixed wine bowl of Christian blood, stripping and gleaning your subjects.' The emperor cheerfully suffered this accusing and abusive man as though he had not heard him or as one who had no reproaches in his mouth.

(185–186)

For the classical reader this is an echo of an episode in the life of Alexander, and yet here this does not seem to be the comparison Niketas has in mind, although the contrast with Alexander would have served his purpose well. Arrian says about Alexander the Great:

At this point in my story I must not leave unrecorded one of the finest things Alexander ever did. Where it actually took place is uncertain: perhaps here [the Gedrosian desert], perhaps, as some historians have declared, in the

country of the Parapamisadae some time previously. The army was crossing a desert of sand; the sun was already blazing down upon them, but they were struggling on under the necessity of reaching water, which was still far away. Alexander like everyone else, was tormented by thirst, but he was none the less marching on foot at the head of his men. It was all he could do to keep going, but he did so, and the result (as always) was that the men were the better able to endure their misery when they saw that it was equally shared. As they toiled on, a party of light infantry which had gone off looking for water found some – just a wretched little trickle collected in a shallow gully. They scooped up with difficulty what they could and hurried back, with their priceless treasure to Alexander; then, just before they reached him, they tipped the water into a helmet and gave it to him. Alexander, with a word of thanks for the gift took the helmet and in full view of his troops poured the water on the ground. So extraordinary was effect of this action that the water wasted by Alexander was as good as a drink for every man in the army. I cannot praise this act too highly; it was a proof, if anything was, not only of his power of endurance, but also of his genius for leadership.

(Arrian, *Anabasis* 6.26)

Plutarch in his *Life of Alexander*, however, has a slightly different version and writes that, during the pursuit of Darius:

At this point he met some Macedonians, who were carrying water from a river in skins on the backs of their mules, and when they saw Alexander almost fainting with thirst in the midday heat, they quickly filled a helmet and brought it to him. He asked them for whom they were carrying the water. 'For our own sons,' they told him 'but so long as your life is safe, we can have other children, even if we lose these.' At this Alexander took the helmet in his hands. But then he looked up and saw the rest of his troops craning their heads and casting longing glances at the water, and he handed it back without drinking a drop. He thanked the men who had brought it, but said to them 'If I am the only one to drink, the rest will lose heart.' However no sooner had his companions witnessed this act of self-control and magnanimity than they cried out and shouted for him to lead them on boldly. They spurred on their horses and declared that they could not feel tired or thirsty or even like mortal men, so long as they had such a king.

(*Life of Alexander* 42)

However, Niketas' anecdote bears more resemblance to a biblical episode about David, recorded in the second book of Samuel:

During harvest time, three of the thirty chief warriors came down to David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and said, 'Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!' So the three mighty warriors broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David. But he refused to drink it; instead, he poured it out before the Lord. 'Far be it from me, Lord, to do this!' he said. 'Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?' And David would not drink it.

(2 Samuel 23.13–17)

There is also a further indication that Niketas has David in mind rather than Alexander when, at the end of the next paragraph, which describes the same man criticizing Manuel, Niketas comments:

Manuel remained silent before even these words, neither grumbling nor muttering under his breath but suffering the rashness of the reviler as did David the impudence of Semei of old.

(186)⁵³

The same book of Samuel also has the following episode:

As King David approached Bahurim, a man from the same clan as Saul's family came out from there. His name was Shimei son of Gera, and he cursed as he came out. He pelted David and all the king's officials with stones, though all the troops and the special guard were on David's right and left. As he cursed, Shimei said, 'Get out, get out, you murderer, you scoundrel! The Lord has repaid you for all the blood you shed in the household of Saul, in whose place you have reigned. The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom. You have come to ruin because you are a murderer!'

Then Abishai son of Zeruiah said to the king, 'Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head.' But the king said, 'What does this have to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord said to him, "Curse David," who can ask, "Why do you do this?"' David then said to Abishai and all his officials, 'My son, my own flesh and blood, is trying to kill me. How much more, then, this Benjamite! Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse

today.’ So David and his men continued along the road while Shimei was going along the hillside opposite him, cursing as he went and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt. The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself.

(2 Samuel 16.5–14)⁵⁴

Comparing Manuel to David is a very positive thing to do, which might seem curious, but the overall tenor of Niketas’ account here is extremely critical.⁵⁵ And one might argue that he has made the comparison in order to show that Manuel is no David.⁵⁶ Despite the classical gloss of the history, and perhaps the most classical part is in fact the extremely recondite vocabulary rather than the allusions, despite this, Niketas’ history is profoundly influenced by the Bible, and in particular by parts of the Old Testament. This subject will be continued in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 Bossina 2009:165, quoting Kazhdan from Kazhdan, van Dieten, Maisano and Pontani 1994:xv. See also Page 2008:61 who writes, ‘at the close of the twelfth century the archaic classicizing style was, as ever, by far the most prestigious by virtue of its alien complexities, but there were other accepted ways of writing.’
- 2 Simpson 2013:126.
- 3 Quotation from Laiou 1991:80, discussed by Kaldellis 2007:342. Brian Croke suggests that Niketas may have known all his intended readers personally, 2010:46. Hunger 1981:46: ‘Another example of the classical tradition in Byzantine literature is the use of quotations from ancient authors, usually without acknowledgement. This reached a peak with Eustathios and Niketas Choniates, the leading authors of the twelfth century.’
- 4 As does for example Harris 2014:23. Laiou 1991:80–81 writes:

The self-identification is now complete and obvious: the ‘Romans’, for Choniates still speaks of Romans, are in fact the descendants of the Hellenes. What is paramount in this self-definition is the Greek language and classical culture. The foreigners are those who do not participate in this culture, Christian though they may be. This self-definition is the result of a crisis.

John Davis discusses the ‘de-classicising’ of historians such as Niketas in his article on metaphrases 2010:56. Efthymiades suggests that the greater use of classical rather than biblical exempla for Byzantine rulers is because he is largely critical of them, 2009:107. Maisano 2006 looks at the way Niketas uses the bible in his history. What I will argue does not contradict his points, but perhaps attributes more importance to the presence of biblical quotations and echoes than he does.

- 5 Scott 1981:62. The third fact is discussed below.
- 6 The preface was also discussed earlier in Chapter 2. Scott suggests that classical allusion was a way of adorning Byzantine historiography but was not fundamental to it and that the real difference between Anna and classical historians was not Christianity – actually God does not play much of a role but the intrusion of the historian herself (1981:63). Niketas too is present much more than his classical predecessors in his own work. One other difference might be the presence of women and

one might argue that the explanation could be both the influence of the Bible, but also Anna Comnene's work.

- 7 Lines 16 and 25–26. Tithonos was Priam's brother, mentioned in the *Iliad* 11.1, 20.237. His wife Dawn asked for immortality for him but forgot to ask for eternal youth, we learn from the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 220–224.
- 8 Magoulas 1984:3, n.7 identifies this reference, on p. 3 lines 34–37, from Niketas saying that one should prefer clarity to obscurity. Euripides, *Orestes*, line 397 has Menelaus saying to Orestes, 'Wisdom is shown in clarity, not obscurity.'
- 9 Hunger 1981:45 who comments on the mythological exempla in Niketas and also that 'Compared to mythology, historical exempla are less frequent everywhere.'
- 10 See Scott 1981 for his pertinent remarks, quoted earlier, on Byzantine historiographers and their classicism. He ends saying:

The point of my sprint through Byzantine historiography is to suggest that it has a distinct tradition quite separate from classical Greek historiography. It is a branch of propaganda or advertisement (even if it is honest advertisement) and takes as its main subject individual rulers. It may turn to the classics for help, but when it does so it turns to biography rather than history. But in Anna's *Alexiad*, the various distinctive features of classical historiography (the preface, the formal speeches and the learned digressions) are certainly present. (71)

He also points out that Anna uses Plutarch more than Thucydides and that it is difficult to find any contact between Byzantine and Latin traditions.

- 11 Scott 1981:62.
- 12 Noted before, see for instance Saxey 2009, Gaul 2003, Maisano 2000 and Vassilikopoulou 1969–70. For a curious development of the importance of Homer in the Christian world see Howlett 1981.
- 13 One might say that this is reminiscent of the gods intervening in the *Iliad*, such as Apollo rescuing Hector in book 20, although in Niketas is expressed in very biblical terms:

But He who in olden times had left a seed for Israel so that His own inheritance should not utterly disappear, becoming as Sodom and being made like to Gomorrah, He who chastises and heals again, who strikes down and restores to life, who does not allow the rod of sinners to be upon the lot of the righteous, had compassion then upon the holy nation, not wishing to cast them off forever. He quite unexpectedly moved the sultan's heart to mercy, which was incompatible with his nature, and whereas the sultan had formerly stood in fear of the emperor's valor, he was now moved to pity by Manuel's misfortunes. Thus He who sets as naught the counsel of Achitophel by way of Chusi and changes Abessalom's mind by promising even greater destruction against his enemies, deflected the Turkish ruler from his duty. Misled by the counsels of his grantees, who in peacetime received money by the handful from the emperor, the sultan dispatched an embassy to discuss a peace based on a treaty with the same terms as before. He anticipated that the emperor, urged on by the Almighty, would accept the compacts which were being forced upon him. (188)

- 14 Vassilikopoulou-Ioannidou A 'Andronikos o Komnenos and Odysseus' *Epetēris etaireías buzantinōn spoudō* 37 1969–70 pp. 251–259. See also Saxey 2009 who argues that Choniates generally followed Homer in making the references positive or negative. However Homer's portrayal of Odysseus is of one of a hero, whereas this is not the case with Niketas' portrayal of Andronikos.
- 15 Discussed in the previous chapter.
- 16 Magoulas identifies several authors being referred to in this passage, namely Homer, *Odyssey* 4.726–7 with the line 'famous from Hellas to the heart of Argos', *Iliad* 5.59 for information about Pherekles, the favourite of Athene, killed by Meriones, Kinna-mos 188 for Philippa's beauty, and Lucian *Dialogi Deorum* 15(13) for the allusion to Herakles and Omphale.

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- 17 καὶ τὴν ἑταιρίδα Μαραπτικήν, ἥς ἐνεθουσία τῷ ἔρωτι καὶ προσπαθῶς εἶχεν Ἀνδρόνικος
- 18 Athenaeus 577c–f has some further, cruder details about Demetrius’ relationship with Lamia.
- 19 Euphrosyne is discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.
- 20 This boar features in Niketas’ history again when Isaak Angelos moved it from the Hippodrome to the palace: he resorted to other measures, such as removing from its pedestal in the Hippodrome the Kalydonian boar, bristling up the flowing hair on its back, and placing it in the Great Palace in the belief that he could thus forestall the onrush of the swinish and reckless populace of the city (558). See Papamastorakis 2009:211, n.5 on the boar and its associations.
- 21 Magoulias in n.1394 points out the name of the sculptor should be Lysippos.
- 22 Scott 1981:63 does not list this as a feature of Byzantine historians, but I would suggest it is related to what he does identify as a feature, that is ‘the intrusion of the historian’s own person’. See Appendix for a list of these apostrophes, with some of the allusions.
- 23 See for instance the incident mentioned in the previous chapter: Niketas writes:

After concealing the letter among Styppeiotēs’ documents and letters he convinced the emperor to send agents to search Styppeiotēs’ tent for the letter. When the charge was confirmed, the emperor’s rage against the man flashed like lightning in the sky. Styppeiotēs’ pupils were forthwith destroyed and he was unjustly blinded, never again to see the sun. (113)

The next sentence which can sound rather flippant, because after talking about blinding, it seems odd to invoke the eye of justice, is: ‘O unerring eye of Justice that sees all things, how is it that thou dost often overlook such transgressions and even other more wicked deeds of men?’ (113).

- 24 Homer, *Iliad* 8.362 and 19.132 for Eurystheus’ tasks.
- 25 See Papamastorakis 2009 for a discussion of this episode.

In general, Choniates’ descriptions praise the beauty and/or the symbolic content of works of art. But this symbolic content is always directly related to actual events and never to religious or other metaphysical aspects. . . . Choniates viewed classical antiquity as a living reality and used it as a metaphor for contemporary events. (222–223)

- 26 Οἱ μὲν οὖν μετὰ τοιούτων κινημάτων τῆς διανοίας τὸ τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς συνέτριψαν ἄγαλμα, ἡ μᾶλλον τοῖς χείροσιν αἰεὶ προβαίνοντες καὶ καθ’ἑαυτῶν ὀπλῖται γινόμενοι τὴν ἀνδρείας καὶ φρονήσεως ἐπιστάτιν κἀν τοῖς τύποις αὐτοῖς ἀπεώσαντο.
- 27 Οὐ μέγα δ’ ἔβραχεν ἄξων, ὅτι μηδὲ θεᾶν ἤγε δεινὴν τὴν ψευδοπάρθενον Ἀθηνᾶν, ἀλλὰ τὴν ὡς ἀληθῶς παρθένον. See *Iliad* 5.838–9 for Athena’s axle groaning:

μέγα δ’ ἔβραχε φήγινος ἄξων
βριθοσύνη· δεινὴν γὰρ ἄγεν θεὸν ἄνδρά τ’ ἄριστον.

- 28 Papamastorakis 2009:223.
- 29 Papamastorakis 2009:216: ‘In commenting on the group Choniates lays particular emphasis on the fact that neither of the two exotic animals was able to vanquish its opponent.’
- 30 See later chapter on Niketas’ allusions to the Old Testament.
- 31 *Odyssey* 11.298–304:

And I saw Lede, the wife of Tyndareus, who bore to Tyndareus two sons, stout of heart, Castor the tamer of horses, and the boxer Polydeuces. These two the earth, the giver of life, covers, albeit alive, and even in the world below they have honor from Zeus. One day they live in turn, and one day they are dead; and they have won honor like unto that of the gods.

- 32 Αὐτός δὲ ὁ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐπιβήτωρ Ἀλέξιος, μὴ ἐν νῶ βαλλόμενος ὡς ἑαυτὸν καθήρκε τῆς ἀρχῆς τὸν ἀδελφὸν καθελῶν
- 33 ἀλλ' ἀνδράσιν ἐντυχῶν νῶ διοικουμένοις καὶ τὴν τῆς ἐλευθερίας οὐκ ἡγνοηκόσι Παφίαν ἐπεκρούσθη. One of the epithets of Aphrodite was Eleutheria, see Ustinova 1999:102, n.77 and Chaniotis 2009:332.
- 34 Discussed by Kalligas 2010:22–24.
- 35 Van Dieten identifies a reference to *Odyssey* 4.770, which is the suitors talking of Penelope and Telemachus, 'Aye, verily the queen, wooed of many, is preparing our marriage, nor does she know at all that death has been made ready for her son.' And also to Sophocles, *Electra* 135, where Electra refers to herself as raving.
- 36 Simpson 2013:274. See also Efthymiades 2009b and Maisano 2000. For instance Niketas uses the Homeric phrase 'barrier of the teeth' (used twice in the *Iliad* and six times in the *Odyssey*) at 111.
- 37 Van Dieten 1975, volume 2:136–138, for the references to Homer which far outnumber any other non-biblical writer.
- 38 Magoulias' note provides the references to *Iliad* 2.631, and *Odyssey* 12.133.
- 39 Oddly as Magoulias points out, Homer does not mention Pirene. However, one can see a connection since Pausanias on Corinth 2.3.2–3 says:

After this is the entrance to the water of Peirene. The legend about Peirene is that she was a woman who became a spring because of her tears shed in lamentation for her son Cenchrias, who was unintentionally killed by Artemis. The spring is ornamented with white marble, and there have been made chambers like caves, out of which the water flows into an open-air well. It is pleasant to drink, and they say that the Corinthian bronze, when red-hot, is tempered by this water, since bronze . . . the Corinthians have not. Moreover near Peirene are an image and a sacred enclosure of Apollo; in the latter is a painting of the exploit of Odysseus against the suitors.

(Niketas also makes the mistake of muddling Tantalus and Sisyphus: at 262 he writes 'The sultan of Ikonion, like Tantalos, forever in dread of the rock suspended above his head.') The other time Niketas names Homer is to say that Manuel was like Homer's Zeus which seems a very positive comparison for what is a critical account of this emperor (76).

- 40 I follow Niketas in his use of the term 'Roman' to refer to what today might more usually be 'Byzantine', see Kaldellis 2007:47.
- 41 *Iliad* 122–123.
- 42 Van Dieten notes the phrase like snowflakes on a winter's day which Niketas uses of the arrows, and which in *Iliad* 3.222 Homer uses of Odysseus' words. See Simpson 2013:217 on Niketas' description compared to Kinnamos'.
- 43 *Iliad* 13.131 and 16.215, for the first phrase in quotation marks and *Iliad* 13.339 for the second.
- 44 Scott 1981:72–73: 'However it is difficult to find a point of contact between the Byzantine writers and the Latin tradition.' Page, detailing Nikephoros Bryennios' military heroes who are Romans, remarks that his sources though tend to be the Greek histories written about Rome, 2012:41.
- 45 A few paragraphs earlier, the reader learnt that Isaak's mother had been tied to a battering ram that was used against Nicaea. She was, however, rescued before any damage came to her (282).
- 46 But see Hinterberger 2010, who argues that in Byzantine texts, although they might use classical terms like *phthonos*, these words have changed their meanings and become Christianised.
- 47 Magoulias points out that Niketas confuses the Cimbri with the Ambrones (see Plutarch, *Life of Marius* 19). Marius does go on to defeat the Cimbri, see *Life of Marius* 27.
- 48 On the vineyard theme, Niketas a few sentences before the passage quoted above had compared the Turks to grapes being pressed in vats by the Germans (71).

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- 49 It is useful to remember this last sentence when reading the praise Niketas suddenly bestows on Andronikos (324–330).
50 Identified by van Dieten. As Hunger points out, Niketas was fond of these combined allusions:

Apart from straight quotations from classical literature we find, beginning with Clement of Alexandria, combined quotations from secular and theological sources. This type of quotation may have arisen from the ‘bad conscience’ of Christian authors who wanted to redeem themselves by immediately adding a quotation from the Bible or the Fathers. Niketas Choniates was a master of composing such combined quotations. (Hunger 1981:46)

- 51 Identified by van Dieten. Niketas uses the expression again later in his work at 573 about the crusaders in Constantinople.
52 Van Dieten identifies this as a strong echo of Aelian, *Varia Historia* 14.30:

Ἄννων ὁ Καρχηδόνιος ὑπὸ τρυφῆς ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώπων ὄροις οὐκ ἤξιον διαμένειν, ἀλλ’ ἐπενόει φήμας ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ κατασπείρεσθαι κρείττονας ἢ κατὰ τὴν φύσιν, ἥνπερ οὖν ἔλαχεν. ὄρνιθας γάρ τοι τῶν ὠδικῶν παμπόλλους πριάμενος ἔτρεφεν ἐν σκότῳ αὐτοῦς, ἐν διδάσκων μάθημα λέγειν ‘θεὸς ἐστὶν Ἄννων.’ ἐπεὶ δὲ ἐκεῖνοι μίαν φωνὴν ταύτην ἀκούοντες ἐγκρατεῖς ταύτης ἐγένοντο, ἄλλον ἄλλοσε διαφῆκεν, οἰόμενος διαρρεύσειν τῶν ὄρνιθων τὸ ὑπὲρ ἑαυτοῦ μέλος. οἱ δὲ τὸ πτερόν ἀπολύσαντες ἀπαῆλ’ ἐλευθερίας λαβόμενοι καὶ ἐξ ἥθη τὰ σύντροφα αὐτοῖς ἐλθόντες, τὰ οἰκεῖα ἤδον καὶ τὰ τῶν ὄρνιθων ἐμουσουργοῦν, μακρὰ χαίρειν εἰπόντες Ἄννωνι καὶ μαθήμασι τοῖς ἐν τῇ δουλείᾳ.

Given the nature of Aelian’s work, a mix of anecdotes and information from various sources, Niketas may have known this story from a different work. The Loeb edition is entitled *Historical Miscellany* and is described in the publisher’s blurb as ‘a pleasurable example of light reading for Romans of the early third century. Offering engaging anecdotes about historical figures, retellings of legendary events, and enjoyable descriptive pieces, Aelian’s collection of nuggets and narratives appealed to a wide reading public.’

- 53 Σεμεϊ is the spelling in the Septuagint of Shimei.
54 Magoulas’ note 507 has 2 Kings 16.5–10.
55 Andronikos compared himself to David, Niketas narrates, 333–334.
56 Along the lines of the methods outlined in Mullett 2013.

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5 The influence of the Old Testament

In the previous chapter, we looked at the classical allusions in Niketas' text and saw that often one could see biblical echoes in addition. The combination of both classical and biblical has been noted before in Niketas' writing.¹ Roderick Saxey ends his article on Niketas' use of Homer in his depiction of the emperor Andronikos in the following way:

It is telling, for example, that in Choniates' account of the conquest of Constantinople – simultaneously the New Jerusalem and the New Rome – destruction comes about both because of the corruption of the city (the New Jerusalem which fails to be Zion) and the wickedness of the Crusaders (the sons of Aeneas who are yet no true heirs of Rome).²

Saxey suggests in a footnote of this article that more than half of all Niketas' allusions were biblical but left this as a suggestion.³ And yet, the matter is of some significance. A crude count of authors identified as being alluded to by Niketas reveal that almost twice as many are from the Bible as from classical sources.⁴ Paul Magdalino and Robert Nelson estimate that of the biblical references in Niketas, 75 percent are from the Old Testament.⁵ The Bible would seem to be a far greater influence and underlying presence than Homer or any classical author, as indeed one might have expected. His brother was a bishop and Niketas himself wrote a theological work, *Dogmatike Panoplia*, which is a refutation of heresies in 27 books.⁶ It is worth pointing out that Cyril Mango had made a general observation that would seem to describe the case of Niketas:

The average Byzantine, then, did not feel any kinship with the ancient Greeks. He was more conscious of the history of Rome, especially from Augustus onwards since that was the history of his own Empire. But, in a deeper sense, he was concerned not with this or that notation, but with the fate of the Chosen People, i.e. first the Jews and then the

Christians. The nodal points of his historical scheme were the Creation, the Flood, Abraham, Moses, the Incarnation of Christ.⁷

It has often been noted that Constantinople was for its inhabitants New Rome, but it is worth remembering that it was also New Jerusalem, and it is this aspect of its history that comes to the fore in Niketas' work.⁸ It may be that Niketas thought he made this very clear, but our less religious age may mean we no longer recognize the allusions as readily as the classical ones.

Of the Old Testament references, almost half are from the Psalms.⁹ The Psalms had always held a special place for the Byzantines, well-documented by Georgi Parpulov in his chapter on 'Psalters and Personal Piety in Byzantium'.¹⁰ The Psalms were the part of the Bible that was read by the pious every day from earliest times, and remains an important part of the liturgy for Christian churches.¹¹ It is also interesting to note that the book of Isaiah is the next most alluded to. The book of Isaiah concerns the punishment of the Chosen People for their sins, and just as Constantinople was the New Jerusalem, the Byzantines were also the new Chosen People.¹²

Isaiah was the one who condemned the sins of the people of Israel (Isaiah 1:1–10) and predicted their punishment in exile, the subsequent creation of a renewed Israel, free of sins (Isaiah 5:13ff) and the calling of many peoples to the faith of the 'mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob' (Isaiah 2:3). . . . The history, related later, is presented as the result of the special mission of the prophet Isaiah to disclose the destiny of the 'last people' in the 'last times'.¹³

So in order to convey what it meant for Niketas to see his city sacked and burnt, it was logical for him to turn to the model for this, that is the destruction of Jerusalem. This in turn may help us find the key to what Niketas is trying to say. The Byzantines, like the Jews, were the authors of their own downfall. Their misfortunes were due to their own failings and failings of their rulers; they failed by actions such as not honouring God but worshipping power, astrology, magic, and divination¹⁴ (338–341, 405–406, 432–433, 448–450). The Crusaders were of course the external enemy, but they were also the instrument of God's will. If Niketas appeared to praise the piety of individuals at times,¹⁵ this is easily overwhelmed by the extremely critical description he gives of their actions as they sack Constantinople.¹⁶

Magdalino and Nelson observe:

Judaizing and hellenizing (lapsing into paganism) were the ultimate apostasies to which deviations from Orthodoxy were compared. In this sense, the place of the Old Testament in Byzantine culture bore some resemblance to that of the pagan classics: it was dangerous if taken neat.¹⁷

It is interesting that Niketas was confident in his use of both the classics and the Old Testament. One could say that he was confident because he was such an expert in both, and therefore knew where orthodoxy lay. In addition to this, one might say that the dangers of being charged with heresy were much less after 1204. Mango wrote:

I persist in the belief that the true culture of Byzantium, i.e. the body of received doctrine and opinion that defined the outlook of a representative segment of the Byzantine public and filtered to the ordinary folk was dominated, not by classical antiquity as we understand it, but by a construct of the Christian and Jewish apologists built up in the first five or six centuries ad. This body of doctrine was very consistently worked out and its ingredients were mostly biblical with an admixture from other sources, both classical and oriental, but always subordinated to the teaching of the Bible. By giving a universal currency to this view of the world, Byzantium achieved a distinctive place in the history of thought.¹⁸

This distinctive definition seems to be true of Niketas. So for instance as noted in Chapter 2, the places where Niketas comments that characters say one thing but have another intention in their hearts, such as we see Alexios doing at the start of his history, or Kamateros when speaking to Stypeiotes, is usually taken to be an echo of a sentiment in Homer. But as seen in Chapter 2, there are several passages in the Psalms which could easily have been the model.¹⁹ However well-educated were Niketas' intended readers, it seems far more likely that they would have thought of these passages in the Psalms than the Homeric references. Also as mentioned earlier, one of the ways in which Niketas' history is unusual for the reader more accustomed to classical texts are the interjections by the author himself, which comment in some way on what he has just written, or is about to write. There is a list in Appendix 1 of 26 such interjections, with some of the Old Testament passages that they echo. From 576 onwards, Niketas' work becomes one long lament, and that was too long to reproduce in full. As can be seen, most of these apostrophes to the reader echo the Psalms or sometimes Isaiah. This kind of address to the reader is not met often in ancient history, but it is very similar in tone to the Psalms which frequently comment on the wrath of God and the punishment he inflicts for sin. For instance, the following passage from Niketas (passage 5 of Appendix 1):

How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget thine inheritance and turning thy face away from us, make a way for thy wrath? When wilt thou look down from thy holy dwelling place and seeing our affliction and

oppression save us from impending evils and deliver us from the fear of even greater calamities?

(209)

This has echoes of Psalm 77.7, which says:

Will the Lord reject forever?

Will he never show his favor again?

And also Psalm 79.5:

How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?

How long will your jealousy burn like fire?

And Psalm 85.5:

Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger through all generations?

And Psalm 88.14:

Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

And also Psalm 89.46:

How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire?

Or one can see later in the history (passage 6 from Appendix 1) in an aside commenting on how quickly an individual's fortunes can change, in this case Andronikos:

O, how the course of events is reversed and sometimes is altered quicker than thought! He who yesterday initiated an undeclared war against the church, he who was insolent and self-will and inordinately over-proud, dragging the refugees thence in defiance of propriety, he who had countless throngs buzzing around him, today is a captive without heart or home, without follower, aide, saviour or redeemer.

(249)

Here there are echoes of Psalm 7.14–16:

Whoever is pregnant with evil

conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment.

Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out

falls into the pit they have made.

The trouble they cause recoils on them;
their violence comes down on their own heads.

Psalms perform different functions. Some are hymns of praise of God, others hymns of thanksgiving, a few celebrate events of kings, but many others are laments of individual or communal disasters, addressing God, describing the suffering, cursing enemies and asking for God's help.²⁰

Not only are there echoes of the Psalms in these particular parts of Niketas' history, but one might view Niketas as having written a work which was fundamentally shaped by a deep knowledge of the Old Testament. One can see that the Old Testament is a history of the Jewish people and thus records their trials and tribulations, including the destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah is sometimes called the Weeping Prophet, and the book which bears his name does indeed lament much of the time. The book of Lamentations is traditionally regarded as having been written by him, and it too narrates the misfortunes suffered by the Jews, more specifically the destruction of Jerusalem in the 6th century BC by Babylon. The calamity is interpreted as a punishment for the people's sins. Although it has been observed that Niketas laments the fortunes or rather misfortunes of Constantinople, the debt to that genre, that is the genre of a lament for a city, is less emphasized. In the *Oxford Companion to the Bible* there is an entry for Lamentations:

Lamentations and Sumerian Laments.

The Sumerians, authors of the world's oldest written literature, cultivated a genre of composition known today as 'lament over the ruined city and temple'. Laments over the ancient southern Mesopotamian cities Ur, Sumer and Ur (together), Nippur, Eridu and Uruk were composed in the early second millennium bce and were copied in the scribal schools. These texts have survived in whole or in part and most have been edited and translated. As a result it is possible to trace parallels in conception and expression between this body of laments and the biblical book of Lamentations.

The subject matter in the two cases is very similar – a holy city is destroyed by the god of that city – and could be expected to produce similarities in diction quite apart from any literary contact so that some scholars prefer to minimize the significance of parallels between the biblical book and Sumerian laments and their Akkadian descendants. Such a view likely underestimates the force of the evidence, and it is preferable to posit that Lamentations is a representative of an Israelite city-lament genre. This genre is reflected also in the prophetic books and is related as a genre to the Mesopotamian works, though details of this process are only conjectural.²¹

The chapters describing the fall of Constantinople towards the end of Niketas' history could be classed as falling into this genre of a lament for a city. One of Niketas' contemporaries, Konstantinos Stilbes, wrote a lament for the city after the fire in 1197 and one can see parallels with passages of Niketas' work.²² The next chapter will look at the influence of the Old Testament on Niketas' *History* in more detail.

Notes

- 1 For an excellent discussion of the interweaving of the allusions, see Efthymiades 2009.
- 2 Saxey 2009:142–143.
- 3 Saxey 2009:124, n.12. Saxey's comment is confirmed by my estimate of the references noted by van Dieten 1975, vol. 2. I counted 488 Old Testament references. Of these, 204 were from the Psalms. Maisano 2000:42 had asserted that about half of Choniates' allusions are biblical, especially the Psalms, and a third of the secular allusions are Homeric, with about 70 percent *Iliad* and 30 percent *Odyssey*.
- 4 From Magoulías' notes at the back, I made a count of the references in Niketas' history, and although I make no claims to complete accuracy, the resulting number was that 354 are classical and 610 are biblical.
- 5 Magdalino and Nelson 2010a:9. Other twelfth-century authors mentioned on the same page by Magdalino and Nelson are the letters and speeches of Nikephoros Basilakes (in which about 60 percent of the biblical references are to the Old Testament), letters of John Tzetztes (about 75 percent of the biblical references are to the Old Testament), occasional poems of Theodore Prodromos (about 75 percent of the biblical references are to the Old Testament) and orations of Eustathios of Thessalonike (about 60 percent of the biblical references are to the Old Testament).
- 6 See Bossina 2009, who begins his article saying: 'Presenting Niketas Choniates as a theologian could cause a feeling of surprise among the authors and readers of this volume.' Simpson 2013:36–50 observes that 'Niketas' discussion of the doctrinal controversies of the twelfth century is technical in nature and conventional in outlook' (49). Angold 2003:201 argues that Niketas wrote this work to defend Orthodoxy in the aftermath of the capture by the Latins of Constantinople.
- 7 Mango 1981:54.
- 8 Magdalino and Nelson 2010a:12–19, 25–30. See passage from Saxey 2009:142–143 quoted at the start of this chapter, also Jeffreys 2010 and Rapp 2010.
- 9 Magoulías xxvii had noted the importance of the Psalms, saying that Homer and the psalter were Niketas' dual sources of inspiration. There is a fairly wide spread of allusions to the Psalms: Psalm 7 was the most cited, being noted 10 times. It is interesting to read the Psalm in full, as Niketas' text has many echoes overall to the sentiments in it:

Lord my God, I take refuge in you;
 save and deliver me from all who pursue me,
 or they will tear me apart like a lion
 and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me.
 Lord my God, if I have done this
 and there is guilt on my hands –
 if I have repaid my ally with evil
 or without cause have robbed my foe –
 then let my enemy pursue and overtake me;
 let him trample my life to the ground
 and make me sleep in the dust.

Arise, Lord, in your anger;
 rise up against the rage of my enemies.
 Awake, my God; decree justice.
Let the assembled peoples gather around you,
 while you sit enthroned over them on high.
 Let the Lord judge the peoples.
Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness,
 according to my integrity, O Most High.
Bring to an end the violence of the wicked
 and make the righteous secure –
you, the righteous God
 who probes minds and hearts.
My shield is God Most High,
 who saves the upright in heart
God is a righteous judge,
 a God who displays his wrath every day.
If he does not relent,
 he will sharpen his sword;
 he will bend and string his bow.
He has prepared his deadly weapons;
 he makes ready his flaming arrows.
Whoever is pregnant with evil
 conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment.
Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out
 falls into the pit they have made.
The trouble they cause recoils on them;
 their violence comes down on their own heads.

I will give thanks to the Lord because of his righteousness;
I will sing the praises of the name of the Lord Most High.

Psalm 17 was cited eight times; Psalm 32, six times; Psalm 43, six times; Psalm 56, four times; Psalm 57, eight times; Psalm 67, five times; Psalm 73, five times; Psalm 78, four times; see van Dieten 1975, vol 2: 128–129. Apart from the Psalms the following books of the Old Testament were referred to: according to my calculations, there are 41 allusions to Isaiah, 31 to Genesis, 19 to Exodus, 18 to Deuteronomy and 19 to Jeremiah, 21 to Proverbs, six to Ecclesiastes, five to Lamentations, three to Joshua, and 10 to 1 Kings, two to 2 Kings, four to 4 Kings, then 14 to Job, two to Leviticus, three to Numbers, three to Judges, three to the Song of Songs, 13 to the Wisdom of Solomon, one to 4 Maccabees, three to Baruch and two to Judith.

10 See Parpulov 2010 and Krueger 2010:217–219.

11 As early as Theodoret's fifth century *A History of the Monks of Syria* we read of the importance of the Psalms for ascetics, II.2 and 5, III.2 and 5, V.2 and 5, VI.10, X.2, XVII.2, XXI.17 and 20, XXII.7, XXVI.6 and 9, XXX.1 and 4.

12 Magdalino and Nelson 2010a.

13 Biliarsky 2010:262.

14 See for instance 338–341, 405–406, 432–433, 448–450. Also Magdalino 2009 on Niketas' attitude to prophecy and divination:

His scornful critiques of emperors being deceived into serious errors of judgement by faulty horoscopes and false prophecies, and of mindless people, rulers as well as ruled, mutilating and destroying ancient statues because of the portentous power they were imagined to contain, give the impression of an enlightened, skeptical mind ahead of his time, who is on the right side of the divide between modern 'us' and medieval 'them'. On the other hand, the sheer frequency of the references

to prophecy and divination might suggest that he took them as seriously as any of his contemporaries. (59–60)

- 15 For instance, he puts some pious words into the mouth of Conrad III in the speech which he addresses to his troops before they fight the Turks (68–70). Also of Frederick Barbarossa on his death Niketas wrote:

But when he came to a certain river (O circumstances unexpected and un hoped for; or, rather, O judgements of God, inaccessible to mankind!) he was drowned in the eddies of its waters. He was a man who deserved to enjoy a blessed and perpetual memory and justly to be deemed fortunate in his end by prudent men, not only because he was wellborn and ruled over many nations as an heir of the third generation but also because his burning passion for Christ was greater than that of any other Christian monarch of his time. Setting aside fatherland, royal luxury and repose, the worldly happiness of enjoying the company of his loved ones at home, and his sumptuous way of life, he chose instead to suffer affliction with the Christians of Palestine for the name of Christ and due regard for his life-giving tomb. Thus he preferred a foreign land to his own and never slackened his rapid pace at long distances, the grievous way, and the dangers posed by the foreign nations through which he had to pass. Neither did the scant water and the measured bread, which had to be purchased and which proved, in some places, to be noxious, deter him from his purpose, nor did the thronging of the children about him and the tearful embraces and last farewells confound or enfeeble his soul; following the example of the Apostle Paul, he did not count his life dear unto himself but pressed forward, even to die for the name of Christ. Thus the man's zeal was apostolic, his purpose dear to God and his achievement beyond perfection. Those who lift their minds to the higher life as loftily expressed in the gospels and strive earnestly to attain it ignore mundane cares as so much refuse. He, I am convinced of it, had a happy end. (416–417)

Magdalino comments that the reader can find five depictions in Niketas' history which are wholly positive and he names them as John II Komnenos, Conrad III of Hohenstaufen, Frederick Barbarossa, Andronikos Kontostephanos and Conrad of Montferrat (Magdalino 1993:13). As Magdalino notes, it is striking that three of these are westerners and only one a Byzantine emperor. In fact, all are brief and the depiction is perhaps less positive when closely looked at than is described by Magdalino. See Appendix 2 for further discussion of these individuals.

- 16 For example:

What then should I recount first and what last of those things dared at that time by these murderous men? O the shameful dashing to earth of the venerable icons and the flinging of the relics of the saints who had suffered for Christ's sake, into defiled places! How horrible it was to see the Divine Body and Blood of Christ poured out and thrown to the ground! These forerunners of Antichrist, chief agents and harbingers of his anticipated ungodly deeds, seized as plunder the precious chalices and patens; some they smashed, taking possession of the ornaments embellishing them, and they set the remaining vessels on their table so serve as bread dishes and wine goblets. Just as happened long ago, Christ was now disrobed and mocked, his garments were parted, and lots were cast for them by this race; and although his side was not pierced by the lance, yet once more streams of Divine Blood poured to the earth. . . . Did these madmen, raging thus against the sacred, spare pious matrons and girls of marriageable age or those maidens who, having chosen a life of chastity, were consecrated to God? . . . The whole head was in pain. There were lamentations and cries of woe and weeping in the narrow ways, wailing at the crossroads, moaning in the temples, outcries of men, screams of women, the taking of captives, and the dragging about, tearing in pieces and raping of bodies heretofore sound and whole. (573–574)

- 17 Magdalino and Nelson 2010:27.
- 18 Mango 1981:57. Simpson 2013:274 acknowledges the importance of the Psalms to Niketas but focuses far more in this section entitled 'Citations and Allusions' on the classical rather than the biblical allusions. I think there is something more profound in Niketas' echoing of the Old Testament than merely 'pointing to his inherent desire to surprise and impress his audience, something he achieves through the formal reworking and "decontextualising" of his model, and also through the rather skilful mingling of ancient and biblical citations' (274).
- 19 Psalm 5.9, 43.1, 50.19–20, 52.2–4.
- 20 Martin Luther, in his 1531 preface, described the Psalter thus:

[it] might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book. (Quoted by de Claisse-Walford, Jacobson and LaNeel Tanner 2014:1)
- 21 Hillers 1993. As Saxey 2009:143 comments in his note 46: 'On Constantinople and Jerusalem consider Choniates' use of Jeremiah and Second Esdras throughout the tale of the sacking.'
- 22 See Layman 2015:1–25 for a discussion of Stilbes' work. Stilbes was known to Niketas, *Epistle* 10, p. 215, line 2. See Layman 2015:10, and 65 n.161.

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6 Niketas on the emperors

If we see Niketas as modeling his work on aspects of the Old Testament, as I have argued, and that he compared what happened to his city with the fate of Jerusalem, then we might expect to see a demonstration of where the emperors went wrong and also the faults of the religious leaders. The start of the Book of Lamentations is echoed by Niketas' description of the state of Constantinople after the events of 1204:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal.
She weeps bitterly in the night,
with tears on her cheeks;
among all her lovers
she has no one to comfort her;
all her friends have dealt treacherously with her,
they have become her enemies.

(Lamentations 1.1–2)

Even before he narrated the sacking of the city by the Crusaders, Niketas lamented the situation of the capital of the Empire, see for example 498–499. The Book of Lamentations demonstrates how God punished Jerusalem:

Jerusalem sinned grievously,
so she has become a mockery.
(Lamentations 1.8)

and

The Lord has abolished in Zion festival and Sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest.

(Lamentations 2.6)¹

Just as Lamentations describes how God abandoned the rulers and priests, so Niketas' history can be seen as critical of the emperors and as describing where they went wrong and also the faults of the religious leaders. There is also the notion that all the people sinned and therefore must be punished in the Old Testament; see for instance:

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain and from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely.

(Jeremiah 6.13)

or

We have transgressed and rebelled, and you have not forgiven.

(Lamentations 3.42)

or

Our ancestors sinned; they are no more and we bear their iniquities.

(Lamentations 5.7)

As Niketas tells the story of the calamity of Constantinople, it seems reasonable to expect that he would demonstrate where people sinned, that is, the leaders, the church men and the ordinary people.² In this chapter, I want to examine if it is possible to identify certain key mistakes rulers, churchmen and the people of the empire made from Niketas' text. I also argue that the text shows us that Niketas saw there was a particular point after which there was little chance of recovery. The following passage to me seems significant:

As events were to demonstrate after he [Manuel] had departed this life, his thoughts and actions were both sound and reasonable; and after this wise helmsman was cast overboard by circumstances, the ship of state almost sank.

(203–204)³

Niketas wrote this just over a third of the way into his history. The description of the reign of Manuel forms the central part of the text, but Niketas has

much more to say after his reign, as several emperors come to the throne after Manuel and before 1204 when the city falls to the Latins. Manuel's reign is the longest in terms of years and of space given to the narrative.⁴ As Magdalino has shown, it is possible to extract a picture of a successful emperor from Niketas' portrayal, despite the frank criticisms the author also writes.⁵ In the passage just quoted, Niketas' words are completely positive. He had just been describing Manuel's successful attempts to win over Ancona, and his anxiety that the Latins would invade, hence the need for allies on the Italian mainland (203).⁶ He goes on to say that Manuel increased taxes and that he spent a lot of money, and there are several pages assessing his reign before Niketas narrates how he started interfering in affairs of the church. I would argue that this incident is the crucial one in Niketas' eyes, the one that led to the destruction of the empire. If, as I have argued, Niketas' model is biblical, and that his view of historical causation owes more to the Bible than to Homer or any other classical author, as one might expect, then the reader can expect the emperor's attitude to religion to be decisive. Niketas devotes several pages to Manuel's interference in theological matters, and describes him as having lost his wits essentially. There is an interjection by Niketas in his own voice, which has the tone of several psalms in that it beseeches God to show some favour:

How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget thine inheritance and turning thy face away from us, make a way for thy wrath? When wilt thou look down from thy holy dwelling place and seeing our affliction and oppression save us from impending evils and deliver us from the fear of even greater calamities?

(209)⁷

This introduces a long passage which is unambiguous in its condemnation of Manuel's interference in religious matters (209–210).⁸ Niketas carries on to say:

Hence the emperor, gifted with a silver tongue and an innate grace of expression, not only wrote letters of great charm but also labored over catechetical sermons, called *selentia*, which he delivered before public audiences. In speaking, he would touch upon sacred doctrines and expand on questions pertaining to God. Often he would pretend to be puzzled and initiate inquiries into the Scriptures; then to resolve such questions he would assemble all the scholars. All this would have been praiseworthy if in extending his inquisitiveness to these matters he had not disputed the doctrines which were beyond human understanding, or if in fixing his mind on these things he had not been so

obstinate, or if he had not distorted the meaning of the written word, as he often did, to accord with his own intent, providing definitions and giving exegeses of doctrines whose correct meaning the Fathers had formulated as though he fully comprehended Christ due to his having received from the Divine the most lucid instructions pertaining to the mysteries of his person.

(210)

Niketas portrays this episode as evidence that the emperor was losing his mind.⁹ He has no hesitation in condemning the mistake of the emperor, and as commented earlier we are reminded that he wrote on theology himself, his *Dogmatike Panoplia*.¹⁰

On the other hand, although Niketas is highly critical of Manuel, it is also clear from the preceding passage that he did not consider his reign as being the one that almost sank the empire; he says that the ship of state almost (μικροῦ) sank *after* Manuel died.¹¹ What happened after Manuel died? Crucially his son and heir was still very young¹² (only 11 years old) and under the guardianship of his mother and his cousin (224).¹³ This state of affairs was clearly unsatisfactory, and it seems odd that Manuel had not ordered his affairs better, given that he reigned for such a long time (about 37 years) and earlier had asked his courtiers to swear an oath of loyalty to his daughter before he had a son (137).¹⁴

The result was that there was a rush for power after he died. His son was too young to be held responsible for any of this. His mother and cousin took over the reign, which antagonized some including the emperor's half-sister.¹⁵ The latter had at one stage been led to believe that she and her husband would rule (137), and it could be argued that her ambitions were thus thwarted by the birth of a brother, and here one thinks of the way Niketas portrayed Anna Komnene at the start of his history. In any event, this sister played an important role as she wrote to Andronikos. Niketas describes the situation clearly; the protosebastos was seen to be abusing his position:

Henceforth, the entire City looked to Andronikos, and his arrival was regarded as a beacon and bright shining star in the moonless night. The mighty and the powerful encouraged Andronikos by dispatching letters in secret to hasten his entry, telling him that there was no one to oppose him or even to obstruct his shadow, and that they were waiting to receive him with open arms and to take him readily to the heart. It was preeminently¹⁶ the porphyrogenita Maria, Emperor Alexios' half-sister, who together with the kaiser, her Italian husband [Renier], encouraged Andronikos to step forth bravely. Maria nearly choked with rage at the thought of the protosebastos wickedly cavorting in the pater-

nal marriage bed. Reckless and masculine in her resolution, by nature exceedingly jealous of her stepmother, and unable to endure that she had been bested and was held suspect as a rival, Maria dispatched letters to Andronikos prodding him like a horse at the starting gate anxious to run the race, delighting in the evil joy of her own making and bringing on her own ruin. Unable to conceal her hatred for the protosebastos she opposed him openly and never ceased from plotting to do him injury. (230–231)

Niketas goes on to name those whom she won over to her side and describes her attempted coup. So a woman is to blame for spurring Andronikos on and helping him to the throne, and I would argue that despite Niketas' positive comments about Andronikos, he saw him as the person who did the most lasting and fatal damage to the empire, and that this helps to explain why he describes him and his activities at such length even before he became emperor.¹⁷ He is the only character who gets this type of coverage from Niketas. We learn lots of stories about him, about his many escapes and imprisonments – one could say Niketas includes these stories about him because he knows them, but he also made a choice to include them.¹⁸ And what becomes clear to the reader are the many opportunities there were to get rid of him, but how he kept escaping, like an Odysseus (or an Alexios?).

I would argue that the clue to Niketas' judgement of Andronikos lies in the ship of state metaphor in the passage quoted at the start of this chapter. At a certain point in the narrative, Niketas suddenly changes from blame to praise and writes that under Andronikos' rule, most of the provinces flourished because he curbed the tax collectors (325–326). Kaldellis says about this surprising turn of the narrative:

What is going on? The contrast is so striking that it seems as though a panegyric of Andronikos has been interpolated into a text that is otherwise hostile to him. . . . We are speechless. This is one of the most paradoxical reverses in the narrative.¹⁹

Niketas described other benefits Andronikos wrought, rebuilding the aqueduct in Constantinople (329), reviving the office of praetor and making sure that the incumbents were well paid so they did not extract money from those under them (330), but it is the wrecking to which he gave most space (326–329). This is a detailed episode, as if Niketas is drawing the readers' attention to it. He says:

Andronikos stormed against such wickedness [wrecking ships driven to land by storms] and transformed the tempestuous zeal of so many to

capsize the ships into a gentle breeze, so that this one deed alone was sufficient to merit him acclaim.

(326)

Niketas says that many emperors had tried to stop this practice but failed, and officials at court assumed that it was not possible to put an end to it (326). He then puts a long speech into the mouth of Andronikos, long in terms of his history that is, addressed to these officials.²⁰ He starts off with the remarkable assertion 'there is no wrong that cannot be set aright by the emperors' (327).²¹ Given the terrible events that afflicted the empire, this lays all the blame at the feet of its leaders. He goes on to say, 'It is necessary that all pernicious actions by the Romans, those detrimental to the public weal, cease' (327).²² The reader is being made to reflect that if this were true, if it were in the power of the emperor, and the emperors had been different, Niketas' history would have been very different. And the emperor goes on to threaten those who do not do his will. It would seem as if Andronikos' forceful approach could have benefited the empire since the measures he put in place did indeed stop the wreckers. And one might conclude that Niketas saw Andronikos had good and bad qualities, that these are two sides of the same coin and that his tyrannical bullying could have been put to good use, as it was here.²³ Niketas ends his account saying that the wrecking stopped: 'It was indeed a bright calm coming out of a storm, and the spectacle was a change truly wrought by the most holy right hand of God' (329).²⁴ One might say that ending this practice was very valuable, but nevertheless the description is disproportionately long, and given in what seems unusual and unexpected detail, so much so that the reader is forced to ponder on its significance. Might it not be that Niketas is drawing attention in his usual oblique way to the fact that Andronikos, although he may have solved the problem of the wreckers, by his own behaviour, had in fact wrecked the ship of state? This is in spite of the good things he had achieved. On the other hand there is the passage discussed in Chapter 4, namely:

For these reasons therefore, the whole head was in pain and these works were performed in the open as though they could never be verified, like the monstrosities subtly contrived by Empedoclean Strife. It was not only every man of high degree and distinction of the opposing faction who suffered most piteously; he was also most unfaithful to his own attendants. But yesterday he had fed them the finest wheat and set before them the fatted calf and mingled stronger drink of the finest bouquet, including them in the circle of his closest friends; today he

treated them in the worst way possible. On one and the same day, one would often see the same man, like Xerxes' helmsman, both crowned and butchered, praised and cursed. *Many who had sided with Andronikos, if they were at all perceptive, deemed praise from him to be a deliberate insult, the conferring of any human benefit the prelude to vomiting up one's possessions and a show of regard, certain ruin.*

(259;²⁵ my emphasis)

One might say that Niketas' later narrative illustrates this last point. That is, Andronikos had benefited the empire, but this just signified that he was about to destroy it. Overall he had wrecked the empire and the long digression of the wreckers encourages the reader to reflect on that. Simpson comments that Kaldellis had suggested that Niketas intends the panegyric of Andronikos to be meant ironically.²⁶ This in fact does not do justice to Kaldellis' discussion, which is less simple than this characterization suggests. Kaldellis argues that

The panegyric is another mirror, reflecting the paradox of the times. . . . The key to interpreting this passage is that Andronikos succeeded in reform only through the threat of violence. . . . This indicts not Andronikos himself but all whom he aimed to reform, tax collectors in particular but also the population at large (in the case of shipwrecks). It is they who, by this sudden reversal of perspective, are revealed as corrupt, heartless and immoral. Having cast Andronikos as a violent monster, Niketas expends the capital of this image by turning it against Romania as a whole.²⁷

Simpson herself suggests that Niketas

was attempting to associate Andronikos' policies and punishments with the populism and severity that characterized tyrannical regimes since antiquity.²⁸

It could be straightforward praise from Niketas, but it could also be his way of commenting on the general disaster that was Andronikos' reign. Niketas does use the figure of speech of a ship of state several times. For example, about Alexios Angelos he says:

Like a steersman who is compelled by the waves to let go of the rudder, he withdrew from the administration of public affairs.

(459)

Or again, about Alexios:

The pilot of the ship of state, therefore, was ill-spoken of by all, and the officers he stationed in command at the bow and the crew were subjected to the most abominable curses.

(484)

Or after the flight of Alexios Doukas, we read:

When the emperor had fled in this manner, a pair of youths sober and most skillful in matters of warfare, these being Doukas and Laskaris bearing the same name as the first emperor of our faith, contested the captaincy of a tempest-tossed ship.

(571)

Niketas reports such terrible deeds that Andronikos performed that it would be difficult to pick out any decisive one, but one detail that could be seen as him turning from God was his use of divination to find out who would succeed him (338–339). This is virtually the last information Niketas gives us before Andronikos is deposed, just as Manuel's interference in church affairs was the last information before Niketas described his death. Niketas reports that Andronikos knew he was in a difficult situation, that the Sicilians would soon attack and that the people in Constantinople had also turned against him, and adds:

And Andronikos suspected that the Divinity had abandoned him for having killed the nobility in so many ways, although he still contended that he was of the fold of Christ and a member of the same family that was being afflicted. Thus he turned eagerly to the prediction of future events. He flattered and paid court to the accursed demons as Saul of old had later looked to the women who had in them a divining spirit and whom he had earlier persecuted in order to propitiate God on his behalf.

(338–339)

Kaldellis also comments on another puzzling aspect of Niketas' description of Andronikos. As Kaldellis describes the account:

By this point in the *History*, most readers probably have come to the point of hating Andronikos and feeling that any punishment is too good for him. His death is, to be sure, gruesome and repellent, but if anyone deserved such a thing it was he. Yet note what happens: as

Andronikos begins to lose body parts, Niketas suddenly castigates ‘the stupid and most ignorant inhabitants of Constantinople’ – he scornfully lists their vulgar professions and compares them to flies – for reviling the man and not remembering that he had been emperor of the Romans, that they had sworn oaths to him and praised him while he still ruled.

(349–350)²⁹

Kaldellis finishes by remarking:

The cruel death of a hated tyrant reveals the cruelty in the heart of us all.³⁰

One might also interpret the episode as Niketas coming back to the idea that everyone had been to blame for the loss of Constantinople, that there were situations where the people could have played a redemptive role, but here they did not.³¹ They, instead of respecting the office of emperor, tore the man to pieces. They had sworn loyalty and obedience and broke their oath, and once the person of the emperor had been degraded in this way, once the office of ruler had lost respect to such an extent, there could be no return.

Other emperors

For Alexios I, as documented earlier, Niketas describes the way he seized the throne as wrong. As discussed in Chapter 2, the emperor himself acknowledges this in his speech to his wife (5–6). John similarly is portrayed as coming to the throne in an underhanded way, which is surprising seeing that Niketas had set the situation up so that we thought that Alexios would name John as his heir in any case. But Niketas goes out of his way to cast suspicion on John’s accession, although at first he had implied that Alexios wanted John to succeed. Later John is depicted as extremely unsure of his position by staying in the palace and not attending his father’s funeral (8).³²

After Andronikos, the emperors are described as completely deficient as rulers. The first sentence of the first book about Isaakios’ reign perhaps describes the situation accurately, but nevertheless after the catastrophe of Andronikos’ reign it reads as oddly lighthearted. Niketas says:

Thus Isaakios Angelos succeeded to the throne with no trouble whatsoever by purchasing it, so to speak, with the blood of Hagiochristophorites. . . . As emperor, he anointed his head with an abundant

measure of compassion for the indigent, and behind his closet door he held converse with God the Father who sees in secret.

(355)

Although this might sound ironic, Niketas does go on to point out that Isaakios tried his best at least with regard to religion, and we learn a little later that he had once intended to be a priest (390). In Isaakios' case, his main mistake appears to have been his trust in a bad priest, Dositheos. Niketas described Dositheos' words as 'worthless judgements' (404), so the reader understands that this character is one of the (many) bad ones.³³ And quite soon, the details are filled in. Dositheos was a Venetian by birth but had been an ascetic in the Stoudios monastery before being bishop of Jerusalem, and had been close to Isaakios before he became emperor and had predicted that he would gain the throne. Isaakios, not surprisingly, was impressed by this and listened to his advice (405). A greater sign that Isaakios was not going to flourish is the following sentence:

The passion and power of the emperors being such that they do not hesitate to alter and change both divine and human matters to their own liking, when Isaakios became emperor, he dismissed Basil Kama-teros from the patriarchal throne, despite the fact that he had strongly supported Isaakios in his rule.

(405)

This interference in church affairs does not bode well, and soon we read that the emperor had Dositheos transferred from Jerusalem to Constantinople.

He [Isaakios] knew that this was proscribed by the canons, and so Isaakios deceitfully (ὑπούλως) summoned Theodore Balsamon, the patriarch of the throne of Theoupolis [the city of God], great Antioch, the man most learned at that time in the law.

(406)

Isaakios played a trick on the poor Balsamon leading him to believe that he, the emperor, wanted to make him bishop of Constantinople so that he would argue the case for allowing a transfer. One could say that the bishop proved himself venal here. In any case Balsamon did help the emperor persuade the synod to allow a transfer, but he was left as bishop of Antioch while Dositheos moved to Constantinople (407). So at least according to Niketas, the blame for this interference should be laid at Isaakios' door, even though he had seemed to imply that the emperor was pious but listened to bad advice. He, here, is presented as seeming to know what he

was doing. On the other hand, one could argue that he sincerely thought Dositheos was a good man. But Niketas goes on to say:

The escort of his [Dositheos'] procession was more splendid and numerous than ever in the past, so that it equalled the triumphs of emperors, and the bishops, who had been tricked and had violated the canons to no purpose, were dumbfounded at the spectacle.

(407)

These bishops were so angry, however, that Niketas tells us that they appealed to the mob (407). They charged Dositheos with 'mounting another's church' and thus being an adulterer, and removed him from the throne. This was quite an extreme move on the part of the bishops. Niketas says that the emperor did not want to accept this, and he installed Dositheos again and had him escorted to the church with bodyguards since he feared the populace of the city. Niketas says that everyone despised Dositheos and the emperor, and then there is the surprising information that Dositheos was again removed from the throne. He also lost his seat at Jerusalem since by this time another bishop had been appointed. So although we have the emperor interfering in church affairs, he was unsuccessful in enforcing his wishes. Niketas, however, comments that after this Dositheos was even more influential with Isaakios:

Then, as it was bruited about everywhere, Dositheos selected images of future events from the books of Solomon and certain interpretations of dreams sent by demons and pulled the emperor around, not by his nose but by his ear.

(408)

So Isaakios' mistake seems more to have been his gullibility for not realizing that this prelate was a bad one. However Isaakios' relation with the divine is shown by Niketas to have been presumptuous and impious in its arrogance. After describing military defeats for the Romans, Niketas says:

After entering the queen of the cities, the emperor, stung bitterly by these events, knitted his brows. Heretofore, when he had gone out against the barbarians, he had presumptuously applied the words of the prophet to himself, 'He shall go forth and return with gladness: for the mountains and the hills shall exult to welcome him with joy, and all the trees of the field shall applaud with their branches; instead of the bramble shall come up the cypress, and instead of the nettle shall come up the myrtle.'³⁴ And since he was puffed up with untoward opinions

about himself, he would often, uttering what was hidden in the recesses of his heart, proclaim that it was not because of the sins we had committed in common and because divine judgement had forsaken us all, that the ear of the Lord has become heavy and hears us not, and we have been given over to be chastised by a people foolish and unwise, but that the people being plundered had been delivered over to these evils because they were paying the penalty for having followed Alexios Branas, when he sickened with rebellion against him [Isaakios].

(431–432)³⁵

Isaakios here is presented by Niketas as believing that the Bulgaro-Vlach raids were punishment for those who had joined Branas against him. The next paragraph is an apostrophe to the readers, a comment by Niketas on the situation:

O the schemes and instructions of the Evil One which mislead some men to interpret these prophecies to mean that God delivers over to the barbarian nations, that rise up together in revolt, countless numbers of the pious in recompense for some fault of one of them, and allows these to be led away and killed as sheep for slaughter.³⁶ For which much weeping Jeremias has lamented in full measure the captives, the slain, and those removed to distant lands were the name of Christ is not invoked.

(432)³⁷

Here Niketas himself cites Jeremiah and makes the direct connection between his own situation and the one described by the prophet. Niketas then goes on to describe the mistaken actions of the emperor:

Isaakios expounded on these things in an extraordinary manner and also made it clear that he would become the sole ruler, that he would suck the milk of the Gentiles, and that he would be the one to liberate Palestine and acquire the glory of Lebanon, slaughtering and plundering the Ismaelites beyond the Euphrates and sweeping away the barbarians round about. He added that the rulers under him would not be like those of today but that they would acquire absolute power and eat the wealth of nations and drain the marrow, that they would be appointed to the very same authority and distinction as that of kings and governors.

(432)³⁸

Isaakios here would seem to be arrogating the Pseudo-Methodian prophecy of the last Emperor and thus showing signs of megalomania.³⁹ His

reliance on the ironically named Dositheos is portrayed as what finally brought him low. Niketas adds:

It was said that Isaakios had appointed as instructor in all these things Patriarch Dositheos, who, like a moth, entered unseen and corrupted his nature, which was inclined toward novel talks, with vain babblings; in the manner that wet nurses lay new-born babes on their stomach to relax them, he made the emperor recline in order to enervate him with the enchantments of fabulous tales. He told him that Fate, without Isaakios lifting a hand, had decreed that all kingdoms should submit to him in the same way that the artist of old portrayed Timothy as he lay asleep while Fortune gathered cities in a fishnet to hand to him.
(432–433)⁴⁰

Again, Niketas judges Dositheos the more harshly. The emperor was easily swayed but the patriarch was the one who did the damage. The author goes on to describe how the churchman interpreted the wrong forecast for Andronikos. He said that although Andronikos had been destined to rule for nine years, God shortened it to three because he was evil. Isaakios' passivity is seen a few paragraphs later when we learn that like a runner he got tired, and transferred the reins of government to one official after another, 'so that he might avoid the weighty responsibility of governing the state' (437). And Niketas goes on to describe the main person to whom he handed over power, Theodore Kastamonites. Niketas is clearly hostile to Theodore and describes the illness that afflicted him as a merciful disease (438) that spread noxious matter to his joints and his reason. Later he died, and Niketas adds the detail that 'his buttocks were covered with sores'. He had had something wrong with his legs even before his illness and had to be carried on a chair everywhere, so this was not surprising. The way Niketas adds the detail would seem to illustrate his hostility, however. After his death, the emperor handed power to a youngster – Niketas says he was so young he should have been studying with an elementary school-master (439). This boy (that is, Constantine Mesopotamites):

Not only did he lead the emperor about in the manner of a leader whale but he also took charge of troop registers as though he had been trained from infancy to administer momentous affairs, or as if even before birth he had been entrusted with worldly concerns as was Sibyl, about whom it is said that as soon as she issued from her mother's womb she began to philosophise about the composition of the universe. He assumed far greater power than that of Kastamonites and deemed lawful whatever the emperor desired.

He was simply a bumblebee or a mosquito buzzing around the lion's ear, or a black-skinned ant-man leading about the elephant, the most ponderous burden on earth, or a fine rope pulling a camel by the nose; one could say, and not without some elegance, that the thick earwax that formed in the emperor's auditory canal blocked out the flow of sound from both sides, or that small is the side door, strait is the little gate, and narrow is the way leading into the palace.

(439–440)⁴¹

Here again, the advisor is presented in a worse light than the emperor, although the latter is at fault for being so weak. Niketas goes on to describe the advisor in very negative terms and then details how the emperor passed his time:

Daily he fared sumptuously and served up a Sybaritic table, tasting the most delectable sauces, heaping up the bread, and feasting on a lair of wild beasts, a sea of fish, and an ocean of deep-red wine. On alternate days, when he took pleasure in the baths, he smelled of sweet unguents and was sprinkled with oils of myrrh, and he surpassed the likeness of a temple with his fine, long robes and curled hair. The dandy strutted about like a peacock and never wore the same garment twice, coming forth daily from the palace like a bride-groom out of his bridal chamber or the sun rising out of a beauteous mere.

(441)

And then Niketas describes the decadent company he kept and that he gradually spent less and less time in the city, although he then goes on to describe his building programme:

Above all, he had a mad passion for raising massive buildings.

(442)⁴²

And there is some narration about all that he did which included bringing an icon of Christ from Monemvasia by deceit, though this is not explained (442). He also apparently removed the contents of the New Church in the Great Palace, and later Niketas is more explicit:

He believed that the Divinity would not be angry but pleased should this temple be despoiled of its former splendor and left to be come a nesting place for birds and the habitation of hedgehogs while another was consecrated with relics removed from their rightful place and magnificently embellished with ornaments taken from elsewhere. He

was also, to put it mildly, so brazen as to defile the sacred vessels which he snatched from the holy churches and used at his meals.
(443)⁴³

The way Niketas describes the emperor's views illustrates his label of 'mad' earlier on (442):

He contended that all things are permissible to reigning emperors and that between God and ruler in the government of earthly affairs there is nothing disparate or contrary which sets them at variance in the manner that affirmation is opposed to negation.
(444)

Niketas describes his generosity, not to say prodigality and then concludes:

Because he did these things and other such things which we have passed over in our narration, he thought that his throne was more firmly established than the sun in the heavenly sphere, or that it was as the stem of a palm tree that grows green from the scent of water,⁴⁴ or that like that towering cedar of Lebanon it would be preserved through the cycles of many long years.⁴⁵ Another would have been suspicious, would have chosen and embrace the good part, not only given the seven days their portion but also keeping the mystery of the eighth day before his eyes. And even though as lord he could have turned the scale both ways, he would ever be inclined towards the better part, swimming readily against the enemy but not sinking beneath the surface. But God did not wish this to be. Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or with whom has He taken counsel?⁴⁶ The Divinity, having taken forethought for the man's removal, roused him to noble deeds and the highest zeal. And by endowing him with courage, made him beloved by many even after his deposition from the throne.
(446)

Niketas had the problem that Isaakios was emperor twice, so he alone must have done something right, so he is allowed to have been pious. And when Isaakios heard his own brother being acclaimed emperor, he called on Christ and God and prayed to the icon of the Virgin that he carried with him. Uniquely too, his response was to see his own errors:

Confessing his sins and promising to make amends, and in anguish of heart he prayed to escape the impending evils.
(451)⁴⁷

Niketas is not admitting an ambivalent attitude towards Isaakios a paragraph later when he says:

At the Monastery in Vera founded by Isaakios, the father of emperor Andronikos, he looked upon the sun for the last time, and his eyes were soon gouged out. As to whether retribution was requited of him at this place by divine Nemesis, I leave for others to ponder. Providence, which administers everything for the best, desires that avengers treat their most despicable enemies with humaneness, *since they must suspect that power is never permanent, that one political action which ungirds sovereignty often is reversed with a new throw of the dice.*

(452; my emphasis)

This observation is perhaps crucial to how Niketas sees the empire – Alexios Komnenos himself acknowledged that he had come to the throne in an unjust way and thus had his own dynastic rule doomed from the start. More immediately, this statement shows, if it needed to be pointed out explicitly since it is so patently false, that his remark two sentences later comparing the Angeloi to the Dioskoroi is meant ironically.⁴⁸ When Isaakios is emperor again, he is so deluded that he thinks his blindness will be cured (558). Isaakios and his son also touch the untouchable, using the church's wealth for worldly concerns (551).

Alexios Angelos

At the start of the reign of Alexios Angelos, Niketas makes an observation about families that have internal warring:

He [Isaakios] was deprived of his sight by those whom he imagined led him by the hand as though they were his own eyes, for what could be closer and more trustworthy than a brother and he beloved? If water drowns us then what shall we men drink? And if our limbs are armed against one another, how can they possibly work together so that we may live? But the healing art mixes from contrary bodies a salutary antidote; and some men have risen up against one another, disregarding the noble gifts of nature because of evil-mindedness and the love for greater glory.

(453)

What appears at first sight merely to be an attack on the Angeloi brothers, about whom Niketas is generally scathing, also includes criticism of the

Komnenoi, to whom they were related in any event.⁴⁹ The passage carries on to comment on the image of the Byzantines to their enemies:

It is for this reason that the barbarian nations regard the Romans with contempt. This they reckoned to be the consequence of all the deplorable events which had gone before by which administrations were constantly overthrown and one emperor replaced by another. There were those who withdrew from close friendships and forswore their old associations: they would say 'if a brother is not safe, then what man is?' and whenever certain individuals revealed their secret intentions to others, the latter, citing the example of recent events, suspected that their intimacy was contrived. Alexios, now on the throne, never realized that he had overthrown himself by deposing his brother.⁵⁰

(453–454)

The point of the passage is not just that the way Alexios Angelos had acquired the throne was counterproductive but that this was nothing new. Niketas had been illustrated this by his opening of the history where Anna Komnene not only thinks she should inherit the throne, but quickly goes on to mount a coup against her brother. The view of the barbarians is referred to very generally and it would seem that one might be justified in thinking that these reflect Niketas' own view to some extent.⁵¹ It is a way of expressing a point of view not completely directly, though it is not particularly subtle either. It was a disgraceful thing, one would have thought, for the Byzantines to be despised by barbarians.

So Alexios' reign is doomed from the start, but he also goes on to other impiety: he used the gold and silver of the church, opened tombs to get the valuables (478–479), and if the reader thought he might have some right to it, Niketas tells us that the men who carried out his orders died shortly afterwards (479). He interfered extensively in church affairs (489–492).

After the brief return of Isaakios and his son Alexios, only Alexios Doukas remains, but it is too late and Constantinople was enslaved:

Since it was necessary for the queen of the cities to put on the slave's yoke God allowed our jaws to be constrained with bit and curb because all of us, both priest and people, had turned away from him like a stiff-necked and unbridled horse.

(569)⁵²

Notes

1 And also

Her gates have sunk into the ground;
he has ruined and broken her bars;
her king and princes are among the nations;
guidance is no more and her prophets obtain
no vision from the lord.

(Lamentations 2.9)

And

Your prophets have seen for you
false and deceptive visions;
they have not exposed your iniquity
to restore your fortunes
but have seen oracles for you
that are false and misleading.

(Lamentations 2.14)

- 2 There is the notion that everyone should not suffer if everyone is not guilty; see the story of Sodom and Abraham questioning God about its punishment (Genesis 18.16–33).
- 3 ὅτι μέντοι καλῶς τε καὶ εἰφρόνως διανοεῖτο οὕτω καὶ διεπράττετο, σαφῶς ὑπέδειξε τὰ μετέπειτα, ἡνίκα τὴν μὲν ἐνταῦθα ζωὴν αὐτὸς μετελλάξει, τὰ δὲ γὰρ πράγματα κυβερνήτην ἀποβαλόντα σοφὸν μικροῦ τὸ τῆς βασιλείας σκάφος ἐβάπτισαν
- 4 The following is an attempt to give an approximate indication of the relative amount of space Niketas gives to each emperor:

John reigned about 24 years, 1118–1143. There are 22 pages of Magoulias' (42 pages in the van Dieten edition). So one page of the translation per year or 1.75 pages per year in the van Dieten edition.

Manuel reigned about 37 years, 1143–1180. There are 96 pages of Magoulias' translation (174 in van Dieten). So 2.5 pages per year, 4.7 pages van Dieten edition per year. Manuel's reign is the longest in terms of years and narrative space.

Alexios II Porphyrogenetos reigned about 3 years, 1180–1183. There are 25 pages of Magoulias' translation (51 van Dieten edition). So eight pages per year – 17 pages in the van Dieten edition.

Andronikos reigned about 2 years, 1183–1185. There are 42 pages of Magoulias' translation (79 in the van Dieten edition). So 21 pages per year, 40 van Dieten edition.

Isaakios Angelos reigned about 9 years 7 months, 1185–1195. There are 51 pages translation (97 van Dieten edition). So five pages per year, 12 van Dieten edition.

Alexios Angelos reigned about 8 years and 3 months, 1195–1203. There are 51 pages translation (105 van Dieten edition). So six pages per year, 13 van Dieten edition.

Isaakios and Alexios reigned about 6 months. There are 8 pages translation (15 van Dieten edition). So 16 pages per year, 30 van Dieten edition.

Doukas reigned about 2 months. There are nine pages translation (17 van Dieten edition). So 54 pages per year, 102 van Dieten edition.

- 5 'All in all, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Choniates, despite his overall admiration for Manuel, did see the emperor's failings as the beginnings of a failure of leadership which led the empire to ruin' (Magdalino 1993:13).

- 6 'He [Manuel] had seen the irresistible power of the neighbor Latin nations and feared a conspiracy, as I have related, that would deluge our lands like a swollen mountain stream suddenly cresting and sweeping away farmlands. Wary lest a small spark ignite the brand which, if by chance it should fall upon flammable wood, will then set off a huge fire that grows into a conflagration, and because of this single suspicion he attempted to extinguish the cause of vexations by imitating those excellent husbandmen who uproot the young prickly plants which ruin the garden plot and destroy the newly budding wild trees' (203). Niketas would seem to be looking forward to 1204 here.

- 7 See for instance Psalm 77.7:

Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?

Psalm 79.5:

How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?

Psalm 88.14:

Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

Psalm 89.46:

How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?

- 8 'In addition to that which has been recounted, the following must be included in the history. Most of the Roman emperors would not wholly accept that they should only rule, and wear golden apparel, and make use of the public properties as though they were their private possessions; neither would they deal with free men as though they were their slaves. For they believed that they would suffer tribulations unless they were resolved to be godlike in form, heroes in prowess, wise in the matters of God as was Solomon, most excellent defenders of the doctrines of faith, more exact measures of the moral life than the canons, and in short, infallible expositors of divine and human affairs. They felt therefore that it was their duty to censure the more boorish and insolent individuals who introduced strange and new doctrines or else to refer them to those whose vocation it was to have knowledge of things pertaining to God and to expand upon them. But they would not take second place even in these cases and so became themselves authors of doctrines and sat in judgement as well as provided their definitions, even frequently punishing those who disagreed with them' (209–210). This passage is quoted and discussed by Magdalino 1993:10.
- 9 'When the controversy over the above-mentioned doctrine was initiated and the emperor recklessly contended for the first time that the god glorified by Muhammad as holosphyros, who is neither begotten or begets, is the true God, everyone agreed that this was the fulfillment of the prophecy because this doctrine, being wholly the opposite of the truth, was truly and absolutely the worst kind of madness' (219–220).
- 10 Discussed earlier, see Chapter 5. See Bossiana 2009.
- 11 Magoulias translates this as 'shortly', so the sentence reads 'shortly after this wise helmsman was cast overboard by circumstances, the ship of state sank.' This makes sense if one views 1204 as being shortly after 1180 when Manuel died. Or one could view Niketas as saying that Andronikos' reign destroyed the empire. However, as demonstrated below, he uses the metaphor of the ship of state in reference to emperors after Andronikos, so it seems more logical to translate this as 'almost'.
- 12 Niketas says,

The affairs of the Romans were borne on an errant and helpless course, worse even than that of Phaethon, who attempted to cleave a path through the starry

sky when he had mounted his father's gold-studded chariot. The emperor, a mere adolescent who lacked an understanding of those things that are expedient, paid no attention to any of his duties, for he had been nurtured on soft airs, and, not having learned for certain what joy and sorrow are, he became a votary of the hunt and a devotee of the chariot races; he kept company with his fellow playmates, and his character was imprinted with the worst qualities. Indeed, his father's companions and blood relatives, attending to other matters, neglected to provide him with the finest education and upbringing and did not notice the ruin of public affairs. (223–224)

Phaethon, the son of Zeus, is killed by his father because he was driving his father's chariot but could not control the horses, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.90–328. The analogy is rather fitting because before he dies, Phaethon has almost destroyed the earth.

- 13 Niketas reports the gossip that they were lovers 'as it was said the protosebastos and protovestiaros Alexios Komnenos, the emperor Manuel's nephew on his father's side, had sexual relations with the young emperor's mother and often consorted with her' (224).
- 14 See Laiou 1991:88–90 on the importance of oaths in this period. She discusses this particular case p. 90.
- 15 Discussed in Chapter 3.
- 16 διαφερόντως
- 17 See for instance when he was captured by the Turks (50). Niketas says that the emperor did not think of trying to rescue them, and that later he freed them without paying a ransom. And then later Niketas says 'Andronikos Komnenos who later was to rule as tyrant over the Romans' (101), and then the rather startling information that he was sacked as duke of Branicevo and Belgrade because he was plotting with the Hungarians to depose Manuel. He was incarcerated but escaped (103). We then learn about his amours and further adventures (104–108). And there is more.
- 18 Simpson 2013:158–170 for comments on Niketas' depiction. 'It is important to note at the outset that Niketas' portrayal of Andronikos was heavily influenced by the writings of Michael Choniates and Eustathios of Thessalonike' (p. 159).
- 19 Kaldellis 2009:95. See also Simpson 2013:162–163 for some general comments.
- 20 Simpson 2013:265–266 who points to the biblical imagery used in the speech.
- 21 Οὐδεν τοῖς βασιλεῦσιν ἀδιόρθωτον
- 22 χρεῶν μὲν οὖν καὶ τὰλλα τὰ κοινοβλαβῇ καὶ κηρεσιφόρᾳ Ρωμαίοις παύσασθαι
- 23 See Simpson's analysis of the depiction of this emperor (2013:158–170).
- 24 Andronikos himself, according to Niketas at least, compared his fate to that of David (333–334) and quoted St Paul (335).
- 25 It is useful to remember this last sentence when reading the praise Niketas suddenly bestows on Andronikos (324–330).
- 26 Kaldellis 2009:95–98.
- 27 Kaldellis 2009:98.
- 28 Simpson 2013:164.
- 29 Kaldellis 2009:96.
- 30 Kaldellis 2009:97.
- 31 This collective guilt is present in the accounts of the destruction of Jerusalem, as noted at the start of this chapter.
- 32 Discussed earlier.
- 33 Simpson discusses Niketas' view of Isaak (2013:170–182) and concludes that his account is 'the most in-depth, and at the same time, the most distorting of Niketas' character portraits' (182).
- 34 Isaiah 55.12–13:

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;

the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.

- 35 I am grateful to the anonymous reader for Routledge for advice on the translation here.
36 Psalm 44.11: 'You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations.'

And later in the same Psalm 44.22: 'Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.'

- 37 See Jeremiah but also Psalm 78.
38 See Magdalino 2009, especially 67–70 on Niketas' use of prophecy in the *History*.
39 See Garstad 2012:vii–xiv on the influence of the Apocalypse of Pseudo Methodius.
40 Magoulias in note 1202 tells us that this is a reference to Aelian, *Various Histories* 13.43, which reads:

Timotheus, general of the Athenians, is reported to have been very successful; he said that Fortune was the cause of all these, but Timotheus of none. Hereupon the painters, abusing him, drew him sleeping in a Tent, and over his head stood Fortune drawing cities into a net.

- 41 This vivid portrait is discussed by Simpson 2013:176–177 and Efthymiades 2009a:47–48.

42 Περισπούδαζε μανικώτερον

- 43 And there is more of the same:

Towards those who attempted to persuade him that such actions did not accord with a God-loving emperor upon whom piety had descended from his forebears, and that such deeds were clearly acts of sacrilege, he became indignant, irritated, and he rebuked them for being manifestly devoid of intelligence and woefully ignorant of the good. (443)

- 44 Echoing Job 14.7–9:

At least there is hope for a tree:
If it is cut down, it will sprout again,
and its new shoots will not fail.
Its roots may grow old in the ground
and its stump die in the soil,
yet *at the scent of water* it will bud
and put forth shoots like a plant.

- 45 Psalm 92:12–13:

The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.

- 46 Echoing Isaiah 40:13–14:

Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord,
or instruct the Lord as his counselor?

Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge,
or showed him the path of understanding?

47 2 Corinthians 2.4: 'For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears.'

48 Discussed earlier.

49 Alexios changed his patronymic from Angelos to Komnenos (he was the great grandson of Alexios I Komnenos), Niketas says 'either because he held the former in low esteem in comparison with the celebrated name of Komnenos, or because he wished to have his brother's surname disappear with him' (459).

50 Αὐτός δὲ ὁ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐπιβήτωρ Ἀλέξιος, μὴ ἐν νῶ βαλόμενος ὡς ἑαυτὸν καθήρκε τῆς ἀρχῆς τὸν ἀδελφὸν καθελών

51 As clearly the Vlachs' opinions reflected them earlier:

So greatly did the Vlachs rejoice over the fate of Constantine that they spoke of making Isaakios emperor over their own nation, for he could not have benefited the Vlachs more than by gouging out Constantine's eyes. This showed how clever they were in these matters, and they sneered at the progressive decline of Roman affairs as they succumbed more and more to an evil lot. They prayed that the Angelos dynasty would be granted a reign of many years over the Roman empire and earnestly entreated the Divinity that, if it were possible, they should never see death or be removed from the throne. These accursed indulged in predicting future events, giving as their reason that as long as the Angeloi reigned, the successes of the Vlachs would increase and be magnified, that they would acquire foreign provinces and cities, and that the rulers and princes would come forth from their loins. I know not whence and how they arrived at such elaborately worked-out conclusions. (436–437)

52 See the passage from Lamentations that started this chapter. As Niketas had written earlier:

It was the Komnenos family that was the major cause of the destruction of the empire; because of their ambitions and their rebellions, she suffered the subjugation of provinces and cities and finally fell to her knees. These Komnenoi who sojourned among the barbarian nations hostile to the Romans, were the utter ruin of their country and whenever they attempted to seize and hold sway over our public affairs, they were the most inept, unfit and stupid of men. (529)

Simpson 2013:291 notes:

Significantly both the rebellion [of Michael Komnenos Doukas] and Niketas' express statement of blame were added in the a-text [the longer version, which was written later] which can only mean the historian was making his case with hindsight. And it was a case based entirely on human fault rather than some kind of incomprehensible providential design.

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7 Conclusion

There is no claim here to have solved all the puzzles and paradoxes in Niketas' difficult text, but I hope that a different light has been shed on important aspects. More than any other text, the Old Testament is central to understanding Niketas' world and his views of historical events. The classical gloss reveals his erudition but not his beliefs, and although he cites Homer many times, his own text is a lament for the state of the Byzantine world, brought about by a turning away from God, just as the Jews had turned away from their God and brought down divine wrath on themselves. I hope to have shown that a careful reading of his judgements on the Byzantine emperors reveal that he saw the calamities being brought about by their impiety or stupidity. Just as King David attributed his success to his piety in 2 Samuel 22, so Niketas attributes the catastrophic failure of Byzantine rulers to their lack of religious observance. The appearance of women in his work does not indicate any type of proto-feminism, but the female characters generally are there to illustrate the misdeeds of the men in their families. I wanted to write this book because I found Niketas' text vastly entertaining and informative and yet difficult and posing many questions to the reader. This is by no means all there is to say on the history, but writing it has helped me find a way in that makes some sense of the material he presents us with. This only brings us back however to the position of Niketas' own readers, who would have needed no such reminder of the centrality of the Bible.



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Appendix 1

Addresses to the reader

I have listed below the passages from Niketas that break from the narrative and address the reader directly (or sometimes God), although I acknowledge I may have missed some. The point of making this list is to illustrate this distinctive feature of the text, and I have also included some references from the Old Testament to throw light on what Niketas may be alluding to in the passage:

- 1 O unerring eye of Justice that sees all things, how is it that thou dost often overlook such transgressions and even other more wicked deeds of men? Neither dost thou hurl forthwith the lightning and the thunderbolt, but, by delaying, thou dost defer divine retribution. Inscrutable is thy judgement and beyond human comprehension! But thou art wise, yea, and thou dost know perfectly what is good for us, even though thou dost overlook our narrow-mindedness. As soon as the prey spies and hears a tawny serpent or shaggy-maned lion in the mountains, it turns aside, but the evildoer can be pardoned if he is reduced to tears and prayers of repentance. With great wisdom man must eschew devising evil in the depth of his heart against his neighbour, hiding one thing in his mind and saying another, and he must seek to be touched by the Almighty.
(113)
- 2 How long, O Lord, wilt thou overlook thine inheritance which lies exposed to abduction and incessant looting and change of rule by a foolish and unwise people far removed from pious belief and faith in thee? How long, O lover of mankind, wilt thou turn away thy face from us and ignore our beggary? How long wilt thou, who art quick to hearken to the afflicted, take no heed of our groanings and delay, O lord of vengeance, thy taking revenge? How long shall these calamities follow one another and the descendants of the bondwoman Agar continue to subjugate those of us who are free and destroy and kill thy

holy nation above every name has called upon thine? How long shall we endure this long-continued servitude and suffer the reproaches and buffetings of those accursed foreigners? Let the affliction of those in fetters, O Master, lover of goodness, come before thee at last. Let the blood shed by your servants cry out to you, O merciful God, as did Abel's blood in the beginning. Take hold of shield and buckler and rise to our aid and make strong the man thou hast chosen and in whom thou art well pleased. Repay our wicked neighbours sevenfold the evils they have inflicted on thine inheritance; restore to us, through brave deeds, the cities and provinces which the foreigners have taken from us and let the boundaries of those who call upon thy name be marked by the dawn and dusk of the rising and setting sun.

(116–117)

Niketas in the passage above has five 'How long?' questions – common in Psalms; for example Psalm 79.5: 'How long O Lord? Will you be angry forever?'

And Psalm 79.1: 'O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance.'

79.5: 'How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?'

79.10: 'Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.'

79.12: 'Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.'

And see also Psalm 80.3–4:

Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.
How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder
against the prayers of your people?

80.7: 'Restore us, God Almighty.'

80.19: 'Restore us, Lord God Almighty.'

Also Psalm 12.2:

Everyone lies to their neighbour;
they flatter with their lips
but harbour deception in their hearts.

Psalm 12.7–8:

You, Lord, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,
who freely strut about
when what is vile is honored by the human race.

- 3 And what of cherished Justice? Does she who is many-footed and many-handed, sharp-eyed and all-seeing, with ears reaching almost down to her feet, haply forget or mark not or completely leave unavenged the unjust calumniations which the accusers concocted against guiltless and praiseworthy men? Not at all! She brings these matters into the light of day, for she peers into the innermost recesses of the earth and overhears whatever is uttered under breath. Whether Justice was wroth with the emperor over this unjust action, I shall not recount at this time.

(146)

- 4 At this point in the narrative I can now say that it is difficult to protect mankind from the future and that none can deliver us easily from the events which overtake us except the Deity, who, through our supplications, takes pity and turns aside the perils or shakes the cup and thereby blends the unmixed wine and dilutes the pure wine because of his love for mankind.

(190)

- 5 How long, O Lord, wilt thou forget thine inheritance and turning thy face away from us, make a way for thy wrath? When wilt thou look down from thy holy dwelling place and seeing our affliction and oppression save us from impending evils and deliver us from the fear of even greater calamities?

(209)

See Psalm 77.7:

Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favor again?

And also see Psalm 79.5:

How long, Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?

And Psalm 85.5:

Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all generations?

And Psalm 88.14:

Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

And see also Psalm 89.46

How long, Lord? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?

- 6 O, how the course of events is reversed and sometimes is altered quicker than thought! He who yesterday initiated an undeclared war against the church, he who was insolent and self-will and inordinately over-proud, dragging the refugees thence in defiance of propriety, he who had countless throngs buzzing around him, today is a captive without heart or home, without follower, aide, saviour or redeemer.
(249)

See Psalm 7.14–16:

Whoever is pregnant with evil
conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment.
Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out
falls into the pit they have made.
The trouble they cause recoils on them;
their violence comes down on their own heads.

- 7 O, what shamelessness, small-mindedness, and levity!
(271)

- 8 Thus God does not reveal to us whether our lives shall be free from toil and sorrow. Neither does he give us any presentment of future evil, or allow us to choose a way of life without danger.
(279)

- 9 Alas and alack, how the ways of ungodly men prosper! They flourish who deal treacherously. Thou hast planted them, and they have taken root; they have begotten children, and become fruitful. Thus did the

prophet make his defense to the Lord when speaking of judgements. For that generation, one might say, produced hemlock to ripen for no other purpose than to bring death to those to whom it was offered, and utter ruin to the majority of cities whose government they lawlessly seized.
(291–292)

See Jeremiah's Complaint 12.1–4:

12.1 You are always righteous, Lord,
when I bring a case before you.
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease?
2 You have planted them, and they have taken root;
they grow and bear fruit.
You are always on their lips
but far from their hearts.
3 Yet you know me, Lord;
you see me and test my thoughts about you.
Drag them off like sheep to be butchered!
Set them apart for the day of slaughter!
4 How long will the land lie parched
and the grass in every field be withered?
Because those who live in it are wicked,
the animals and birds have perished.
Moreover, the people are saying,
'He will not see what happens to us.'

10 O teardrops, shed by those of old and ourselves in the affliction of our souls, showering down on our hearts as from a cloudburst! O portent of greater sorrow and unequivocal proof of inner distress! Sometimes they flow or trickle from the tearducts from joy but this was not the case with Andronikos, from whom the flow of tears presaged certain death. O, the light of how many pupils have you extinguished with your hot flow? O, how many have you swept along to Hades in your torrential downpour? O, how many have you washed away in your deluge! O, what manner of men have you dispatched to their graves as their very last bathwater, or as a drink-offering made over their tombs and poured out as the last libation?
(295)

11 How could men who defiled the divine and took absolutely no heed of God be expected to spare human life? It was less novel that they

plundered the votive offerings to God, placed profane hands on the sacred, and looked with shameless eyes upon those things forbidden to be seen than it was unholy to have dashed the all-hallowed icons of Christ and his servants to the ground firmly planting their feet on them, they forcibly removed their precious adornments and then threw the icons out into the streets to be trampled under foot by the passers-by, or they cast them into the fire to cook their food.

(299)

- 12 What unending evil was permitted this Roman-hater, and what animosity he had stored in his heart against every Hellene! Even the serpent, the ancient plotter against the human race, did not conceive and beget such enmity. But because the land which was our allotted portion to inhabit, and to reap the fruits thereof, was openly likened to paradise by the most accursed Latins, who were filled with passionate longing for our blessings, they were ever ill-disposed toward our race and remain forever workers of evil deeds. Though they may dissemble friendship, submitting to the needs of the time, they yet despise us as their bitterest enemies; and though their speech is affable and smoother than oil flowing noiselessly, yet are their words darts, and thus they are sharper than a two-edged sword. Between us and them the greatest gulf of disagreement has been fixed, and we are separated in purpose and diametrically opposed, even though we are closely associated and frequently share the same dwelling. Overweening in their pretentious display of straightforwardness, the Latins would stare up and down at us and behold with curiosity the gentleness and lowliness of our demeanor; and we, looking grimly upon their superciliousness, boastfulness, and pompousness, with the drivel from their nose held in the air, are committed to this course and grit our teeth, secure in the power of Christ who gives the faithful the power to tread on serpents and scorpions and grant them protection from all harm and hurt.

(301)

See Psalm 55.21:

His talk is smooth as butter,
 yet war is in his heart;
 his words are more soothing than oil,
 yet they are drawn swords.

And see Hebrews 4:12–14 New International Version (NIV):

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and

marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

- 13 What then? If the Sicilians welcomed the former masters of the houses with such kindnesses and paid them court in this fashion, did they perchance admit with tender feeling and treat with kindheartedness the rest, who passed by their dwellings as though they were the mouths of caves leading down into hell, or the Cretan labyrinth, or a Laconian pit? Not at all! How could it be otherwise with such men who were more savage than the wild beasts and who were wholly ignorant of the meaning of pity, and who rejoiced over human calamities? Like dogs, the victims drew back from those who overtook them and did not molest them with their teeth, but crouched before their pursuers without even barking and voluntarily shut their jaws.

(303–304)

- 14 Let the story of how liberty was to be won and through whom God was to work this new marvel await the proper time. [re Thessaloniki]

(308)

- 15 O fierce flame! O burnt offering, most welcomed by demons! O sacrificial victim of the Telchines! O whole offering of avenging spirits! O that which is not the smell of sweetness which the Lord smells but instead a dance of Furies!

(311)¹

- 16 (I praise thee, O Justice!)

(314)

- 17 And should we seek to apprehend the deeper judgments of God, the Lord smites us because he knows our sins. Because those who, by the will of God, laid hold of us to flog us were both reckless and merciless, they, too, did not escape the just wrath of him who will have mercy and in measure feeds us the bread of tears and gives us tears to drink. But, as a lion leaping out of a thicket, like the destructive whelps of a wolf, and like a pouncing leopard, the captors became captives and the victors were vanquished, and the Lord had prepared for them a spirit of error that revealed the red-coloured stains caused by their murderous ways and in need of cleansing. They crossed their own borders and invaded our lands; flogging us for a short time, they were flogged much more. Thus did Justice take vengeance on the cavalry.

(361–362)

See Psalm 79.6:

Pour out your wrath on the nations
that do not acknowledge you,

And see Isaiah 14–15:

The Lord has poured into them
a spirit of dizziness;
they make Egypt stagger in all that she does,
as a drunkard staggers around in his vomit.
There is nothing Egypt can do –
head or tail, palm branch or reed.

- 18 He did not speak of the sins which we have committed in common and the abandonment of us all to the judgment of God (for the ear of the Lord has become heavy and hears us not and we have been given over to be chastised by a people foolish and unwise). . . . O the schemes and instructions of the Evil One which mislead some men to interpret these prophecies to mean that God delivers over to the barbarian nations, that rise up together in revolt, countless numbers of the pious in recompense for some fault of one of them, and allows these to be led away and killed as sheep for slaughter. For which much weeping Jeremias has lamented in full measure the captives, the slain, and those removed to distant lands where the name of Christ is not invoked.

(432)

See Psalm 44.11:

You gave us up to be devoured like sheep
and have scattered us among the nations.

Psalm 44.22:

Yet for your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

- 19 He was deprived of his sight by those whom he had imagined led him by the hand as though they were his own eyes, for what could be closer and more trustworthy than a brother, and he beloved? If water drowns us, then what shall we men drink? And if our limbs are armed against one another, how can they possibly work together so that we may live?

But the healing art mixes from contrary bodies a salutary antidote; and some men have risen up against one another, disregarding the noble gifts of nature because of evil-mindedness and the love for greater glory. It is for this reason that the barbarian nations regard the Romans with contempt.

(453)

- 20 Who, having pursued a bloodthirsty beast, does not see it a short time later springing and making a kill? Or who, having made friends with a venomous serpent, even becoming attached to it and nurturing it in his bosom, is not mortally wounded when it bites and disgorges its venom? However Isaakios Komnenos gave up the ghost shortly thereafter and joined those other tyrants whom the hand of the Lord utterly destroyed, even though He does not usually immediately execute those salutary measures which He frequently innovates. It pleased Him to lay low the accursed wretch, not by natural death, but by poison given him by a certain cupbearer who was emboldened in this deed by huge bribes from his emperor.

(464)

- 21 As for what followed – but who can worthily speak of the mighty deeds of the Lord or who shall cause His praises to be heard?

(479)

See Psalm 105.1–2:

Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.

- 21 O throne of the Romans, how celebrated and envied by all nations! Majesty adored, what violators have you endured! The insolent men that have risen up against you! The lovers that have gone mad over you! The admirers you have embraced! The wooers to whom you have given yourself and showered with caresses and bound with the wreath and crowned with the diadem, and on whom you have tied the crimson buskins! Your sufferings are more heartrending than those of Penelope. In no way do you differ from a queen all-blessed, nobly beautiful, shapely and comely who is seized by the hands of shameless lovers whom the prudent deem worthless. Unaware of her majesty and disrespectful of her grandeur, they ignore her nobility and drag her away in lust, carrying her off to be ravished in an unlawful bed.

Oh what shameless acts you have endured and witnessed! Celebrated and renowned, you have taken on a harlot's face. Gone is your simple beauty, the modesty of your manner, and your temperate and chaste mode of life. Your face is heavily made up with cosmetics and paints, and you have been gotten ready for wanton pleasures and made over for licentious behaviour. They who have violated you have transformed your once beautiful, admirable and lovely form to that of a courtesan. When shall you lay aside this deformed beauty of your form, the unshapeliness of your figure, the affected look and gait? Who shall extricate you from the tyrannical embraces forced upon you and restore you to your former chaste behavior? But now we are in danger of turning pity into laughter, for it is not fitting that we should see you suffering such misfortunes and we cannot bear that you should abide in such disgraceful conduct. But so be it!

(498)

See Jeremiah 3 New International Version (NIV):

Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute;
you refuse to blush with shame.

See also Isaiah 1.21:

See how the faithful city
has become a prostitute!
She once was full of justice;
righteousness used to dwell in her –
but now murderers!

- 22 O Herakles, brave and great-hearted hero, the absurdity and folly of those things dared against you! Did a Eurystheus ever propose such a task for you? Did an Omphale, inflamer of amours and lascivious wench, treat you so disdainfully?

(520)

- 23 Up to now, the course of our history has been smooth and easily traversed, but from this point on I do not know how to continue. What judgement is reasonable for him who must relate in detail the common calamities which this queen of cities endured during the reign of the terrestrial angels? I would that I might worthily and fully recount the most oppressive and grievous of all evils. But since this is impossible

I shall abbreviate the narration in the hope that it will be of greater profit to posterity because moderation has been exercised in reporting the sufferings, thereby mitigating excessive grief.

(535)

- 24 What then should I recount first and what last of those things dared at that time by these murderous men? O the shameful dashing to earth of the venerable icons and the flinging of the relics of the saints who had suffered for Christ's sake, into defiled places! How horrible it was to see the Divine Body and Blood of Christ poured out and thrown to the ground! These forerunners of Antichrist, chief agents and harbingers of his anticipated ungodly deeds, seized as plunder the precious chalices and patens; some they smashed, taking possession of the ornaments embellishing them, and they set the remaining vessels on their table so serve as bread dishes and wine goblets. Just as happened long ago, Christ was now disrobed and mocked, his garments were parted, and lots were cast for them by this race; and although his side was not pierced by the lance, yet once more streams of Divine Blood poured to the earth. . . . Did these madmen, raging thus against the sacred, spare pious matrons and girls of marriageable age or those maidens who, having chosen a life of chastity, were consecrated to God? . . . The whole head was in pain. There were lamentations and cries of woe and weeping in the narrow ways, wailing at the crossroads, moaning in the temples, outcries of men, screams of women, the taking of captives, and the dragging about, tearing in pieces and raping of bodies heretofore sound and whole.

(573–574)

See Isaiah 1.5:

Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.

- 25 O Christ our Emperor, what tribulation and distress of men at that time! The roaring of the sea, the darkening and dimming of the sun, the turning of the moon into blood, the displacement of the stars – did they not foretell in this way the last evils? Indeed, we have seen the abomination of desolation stand in the holy place, rounding off meretricious and petty speeches and other things which were moving definitely, if not altogether, contrariwise to those things deemed by Christians as holy and ennobling the word of faith.

(575)

- 26 O City, City, eye of all cities, universal boast, supramundane wonder, wet nurse of churches, leader of the faith, guide of Orthodoxy, beloved topic of orations, the abode of every good thing! O City, consumed by a fire far more drastic than the fire which of old fell upon the Pentapolis! What shall I testify to thee? What shall I compare to thee? The cup of thy destruction is magnified, says Jeremias, who was given to tears as he lamented over ancient Sion. What malevolent powers have desired to have you and taken you to be sifted? What jealous and relentless avenging demons have made a riotous assault upon you in wild revel? If these implacable and crazed suitors neither fashioned a bridal chamber for thee, nor lit a nuptial torch for thee, did they not, however ignite the coals of destruction?

O prolific City, once garbed in royal silk and purple and now filthy and squalid and heir to many evils, having need of true children! O City, formerly enthroned on high, striding far and wide, magnificent in comeliness and more becoming in stature; now thy luxurious garments and elegant royal veils are rent and torn; thy flashing eye has grown dark, and thou art like unto an aged furnace woman all covered with soot and thy formerly glistening and delightful countenance is now furrowed by loose wrinkles. I shall forgo describing those who set words to the music of the lyre and sang of thy calamities and, drunk with wine, turned thy tragedy into a comedy, making a profession of out of the farcical recitation of thine afflictions: blows struck with the fist and the foot, bruises, moreover and black eyes inflicted up on thee every hour of the day; for by God's will thou hast provoked to jealousy the foolish nations, or rather, those people who are not truly nations but obscure and scattered tribes, and if thou didst not give birth to the majority of them, thou didst, however, raise them up and provide them with the fat of wheat.

Who shall save thee? Or who shall comfort thee? Or who shall turn back to inquire after thy welfare? Thus spake the much-wailing Jeremias. Who shall dress in thy former raiment? When shall thou hear those divinely inspired words: Awake, awake, stand up, O City, that hast drunk the cup of my fury and the cup of calamity. Put on thy strength, put on thy glory. Shake off the dust and arise. Put off the hand of thy neck. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and of thy curtains. Fear not because thou has been put to shame, neither be confounded because thou wast reproached, and all that go by the way have clapped their hands at thee; they have hissed and shaken their heads and have said This is the city, the crown of glory and of joy of all the earth, and How does the city that was filled with

people sit as a widow and how has she, princess among provinces,
become tributary? For thy God has said, for a little while I left thee,
but with great mercy will I have compassion upon thee. In a little
wrath I turned away my face, but with everlasting mercy will I have
compassion upon thee.

(576–578)

Isaiah 51.17:

Awake, awake!
Rise up, Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord
the cup of his wrath,
you who have drained to its dregs
the goblet that makes people stagger.

Isaiah 51.19:

These double calamities have come upon you –
who can comfort you? –
ruin and destruction, famine and sword –
who can console you?

And see Lamentations 2.13:

What can I say for you?
With what can I compare you,
Daughter Jerusalem?
To what can I liken you,
that I may comfort you,
Virgin Daughter Zion?
Your wound is as deep as the sea.
Who can heal you?

Jeremiah 4.5–6:

Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say:
‘Sound the trumpet throughout the land!’
Cry aloud and say:
‘Gather together!
Let us flee to the fortified cities!’

Raise the signal to go to Zion!
 Flee for safety without delay!
 For I am bringing disaster from the north,
 even terrible destruction.

And see Jeremiah 9.10–11:

I will weep and wail for the mountains
 and take up a lament concerning the wilderness grasslands.
 They are desolate and untraveled,
 and the lowing of cattle is not heard.
 The birds have all fled
 and the animals are gone.
 ‘I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins,
 a haunt of jackals;
 and I will lay waste the towns of Judah
 so no one can live there.’

And Jeremiah 25.15–38:

This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: ‘Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. When they drink it, they will stagger and go mad because of the sword I will send among them.’

So I took the cup from the Lord’s hand and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it: Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, its kings and officials, to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn, a curse – as they are today; Pharaoh king of Egypt, his attendants, his officials and all his people, and all the foreign people there; all the kings of Uz; all the kings of the Philistines (those of Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, and the people left at Ashdod); Edom, Moab and Ammon; all the kings of Tyre and Sidon; the kings of the coastlands across the sea; Dedan, Tema, Buz and all who are in distant places; all the kings of Arabia and all the kings of the foreign people who live in the wilderness; all the kings of Zimri, Elam and Media; and all the kings of the north, near and far, one after the other – all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. And after all of them, the king of Sheshak will drink it too.

‘Then tell them, “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Drink, get drunk and vomit, and fall to rise no more because of the sword I will send among you.” But if they refuse to take the cup from your hand and drink, tell them, “This is what the Lord Almighty

says: You must drink it! See, I am beginning to bring disaster on the city that bears my Name, and will you indeed go unpunished? You will not go unpunished, for I am calling down a sword on all who live on the earth, declares the Lord Almighty.”

“Now prophesy all these words against them and say to them:

‘The Lord will roar from on high;
he will thunder from his holy dwelling
and roar mightily against his land.

He will shout like those who tread the grapes,
shout against all who live on the earth.

The tumult will resound to the ends of the earth,
for the Lord will bring charges against the nations;
he will bring judgment on all mankind
and put the wicked to the sword,”

declares the Lord.

This is what the Lord Almighty says:

“Look! Disaster is spreading
from nation to nation;
a mighty storm is rising
from the ends of the earth.”

At that time those slain by the Lord will be everywhere – from one end of the earth to the other. They will not be mourned or gathered up or buried, but will be like dung lying on the ground.

Weep and wail, you shepherds;
roll in the dust, you leaders of the flock.
For your time to be slaughtered has come;
you will fall like the best of the rams.
The shepherds will have nowhere to flee,
the leaders of the flock no place to escape.
Hear the cry of the shepherds,
the wailing of the leaders of the flock,
for the Lord is destroying their pasture.
The peaceful meadows will be laid waste
because of the fierce anger of the Lord.
Like a lion he will leave his lair,
and their land will become desolate
because of the sword of the oppressor
and because of the Lord’s fierce anger.

Note

- 1 ὡς πυρρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἀνήμερος. ὡς ἀσπάσιον δαίμοσιν ὀλοκαύτωμα. ὡς ἱερεῖον Τελχίνων. ὡς ἀλαστόροων ὀλόκληρος προσφορά. οὐκ εὐωδίας ὁσμὴ, ἣν ὀσφραίνεται Κύριος, ἀλλ' Ἐριννύων χορὸς Niketas here inserts a reference to the Old Testament (Genesis 8.21 noted by van Dieten) in the middle of the classical references. The paragraph goes on to say that Andronikos had a more ruthless soul than the worst men that had ever lived, naming Cambyses, Tarquin, Echetos and Phalaris (312). It is as if the Bible does not contain bad enough villains for Niketas to use.

Appendix 2

Niketas' flawless heroes

Paul Magdalino in his book on Manuel comments on how modern scholars have generally followed Niketas' judgments on the characters in his history, although they would never subscribe to his view of historical causation, which is that we can see Divine Providence at work in human affairs.¹ Magdalino admits that Niketas is not crude in his approach, but

the theme of divine retribution clearly underlies his whole vision of the Comnenian empire's decline and fall, and it is the strand which connects all his disapproving remarks about the emperors of his day.²

Magdalino's concern is to demonstrate that Manuel may not have been as Choniates described him, which is on the whole negatively. And in the course of this argumentation, Magdalino comments that Niketas could depict heroes without flaws. It is not the case that Niketas was negative about all his characters, and Magdalino comments that the reader can find five depictions which are wholly positive, and he names them as John II Komnenos, Conrad III of Hohenstaufen, Frederick Barbarossa, Andronikos Kontostephanos and Conrad of Montferrat.³ As Magdalino notes, it is striking that three of these are westerners and only one a Byzantine emperor.

What is also worth noting is that apart from that of John II Komnenos, none of these depictions is particularly lengthy and one has to look quite carefully to find the praise.⁴ The presentation of John I have already dealt with in Chapter 2, and it seems to me that the account is too brief to be significant. It could be argued that in relative terms he is presented positively to act as a foil for later emperors. Here I propose to look at what Niketas says about the other flawless heroes to establish what virtues he considers to be important.

Conrad III of Hohenstaufen

With regard to Conrad III of Hohenstaufen, Niketas in fact writes very little about him. We see him tricked by the bishop of Philippopolis, Michael Italikos, and it is not clear whether the reader is meant to admire the bishop or not (62–63). He said one thing but meant another, as we see several characters doing in Niketas' history, but whether that is a criticism is not clear. Niketas adds that he hid his true feelings to benefit the Romans, which must surely be admirable, or at least not easy for a reader to condemn (63). The king, on the other hand, is neither criticized nor praised, but we learn on the next page that he thought God must be on the Roman side because the river burst its banks and flooded the German camp (65). The first time there is an explicit judgment about Conrad we learn that initially he 'was overbearing and stupidly⁵ refused to cross over' the straits to Constantinople (65). But there is not a huge amount in Niketas' account for Conrad III to qualify as one of Niketas' flawless heroes. Perhaps Magdalino picked him out because of the speech which he addresses to his troops before they fight the Turks (68–70).

It is the first direct speech given in the history in the reign of Manuel. Conrad tells his men that they came for Christ and the glory of God and that they should be ready to die for Christ. The enemy are barbarians and they have defiled the holy place. He adds that the Romans should already have ejected them, but they have not so it's their duty to do so. Here we have criticism of the Byzantines put in the mouth of a westerner, but meant for Niketas' readership.⁶ Niketas suggests that even the westerners can see what they should have done, and this is why the westerners are there in the first place. If the Romans had got rid of the Turks they would not have problems with the Crusaders. Conrad says I will be the first; let us rush and the river will stop as in the Bible. They do rush forward and are successful, and the bones of the Turks are compared to the bones of the Cimbri. In other words this is a martial and a pious speech, and these are qualities crucial in Niketas' eyes for a good leader. But it is virtually the last we read about Conrad apart from a mention at the start of the following book (73).

Frederick

Frederick Barbarossa, Conrad's nephew, is at first described as a high-spirited man who was overcome by passion and later had to be placated (63). Conrad had sent Frederick to avenge the death of a kinsman by the treacherous Romans. Frederick reacted strongly and took his revenge. The story is a little odd, as Niketas says that Conrad was forced to camp in Adrianople because his kinsman was ill. Some thieving Romans attacked and burnt the lodging,

killing the kinsman and his companions. Conrad told Frederick to avenge the death, so Frederick burnt down the monastery where the kinsman had been staying. The lodging thus must have been part of the monastery, so Frederick burnt down the whole place and condemned men who had been arrested to death. Niketas commends Prosuch⁷ who managed to placate Frederick – presumably from taking the matter further (64).

We meet Frederick again when we read about Manuel arming the Italian cities against him (200). There is no particular judgment displayed here – the king is referred to as crafty,⁸ which does not seem particularly positive (200). Manuel's efforts could be seen as wise (200). However when Frederick appears in the history during the reign of Isaakios, Niketas' view is more apparent. Frederick was passing through the Byzantine empire on the way to Palestine (402) (this is the Third Crusade). Niketas is blunt about the two Romans sent to deal with Frederick, who had sent envoys about his journey. Niketas says about 'the logothete [who had been named a little earlier as John Doukas (402)] and Andronikos Kantakouzenos', 'through ignorance of their obligations and their unmanliness' they made the king angry and turned him against the emperor (402). He explains why he uses such direct words about his own countrymen: 'for it is our duty to honour truth as being more important and precious than our own dear friends' *χρεὼν γὰρ φίλων ἡμῖν τῶν ἀνδρῶν ὄντων ὥς πρεσβυτέραν καὶ φιλτέραν τιμᾶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν* (402). This is very similar to what he will write near the end of his work:

Inasmuch as the worst elements prevail among the Constantinopolitans (for truth is dearer to me than my compatriots), Doukas grew stronger and increased in power.

(564)⁹

Here then we see that Niketas is criticizing his fellow Romans and exonerating Frederick from blame. In the next instance where Frederick appears, again the Romans behave in a reprehensible way, and Frederick's behaviour is only a response to this (410). Niketas narrates that the Romans had treated Frederick's envoys with disrespect, making them stand in the emperor's presence as if they were servants, so when Frederick received the Roman envoys, he made everyone sit including their servants. These last protested that they did not sit with their masters, but Frederick insisted. Niketas explains:

He did this to mock the Romans and to show that there was no distinction among them in virtue and family, but just as the swineherds herd all the hogs into a sty without separating the fat ones and allow them to mingle about, in like manner all the Romans stood together.

(410)

Michael Angold observed about this incident:

Western society seemed more effectively organised. This seems to be the lesson that Niketas Choniates drew from an incident involving Frederick Barbarossa and a Byzantine embassy. The German emperor made the emissaries all sit down with their servants and grooms, in order to stress that at Byzantium there was no distinction of rank; that under the emperor all were equal, 'like pigs in a sty'.¹⁰

Niketas may well have judged western society to have been more efficient, but that does not seem to be the lesson Niketas would have his readers draw from this incident. The logic of the story is that he is showing how Frederick took his revenge on having his embassy not treated with enough respect, because they were forced to stand. After describing how all the Roman entourage had to sit, he carries on the narrative with Frederick telling some of his men to wait at Philippopolis while he proceeded to Orestias, so that their legs might recover from having to stand for so long (411). Frederick thought his embassy had been shown disrespect, and he pretends to misunderstand Byzantine society as being one of equality. No one could possibly have thought Byzantine society was one of equality. It would seem that the imagery of pigs was of Niketas' creation. It is certainly very striking, but Niketas was describing his own contemporaries who, in his opinion, had made a mess of a delicate situation. He had started the account of this episode saying that he himself had had strong words with the emperor:

I omit what was said between the emperor and myself, which was deserving more of condemnation than of praise, and say only that he was finally persuaded to allow the envoys to return to the king.

(410)

These sharp words had occurred because the emperor had written to the king telling him he would be dead before Easter. The issue was the bad faith of the Romans in not allowing Frederick to pass through their territory as had earlier been agreed. The way Niketas presents the issue, the Romans had behaved dishonourably, and by contrast Frederick is portrayed in a positive light. This is continued when Niketas talks of the king's reputation was military prowess and wisdom (414 and 416).

However the main reason why we know that Niketas had a favourable opinion of this westerner is the paragraph he devotes to him on his death:

But when he came to a certain river (O circumstances unexpected and unhopd for; or, rather, O judgements of God, inaccessible to

mankind!) he was drowned in the eddies of its waters. He was a man who deserved to enjoy a blessed and perpetual memory and justly to be deemed fortunate in his end by prudent men, not only because he was wellborn and ruled over many nations as an heir of the third generation but also because his burning passion for Christ was greater than that of any other Christian monarch of his time. Setting aside fatherland, royal luxury and repose, the worldly happiness of enjoying the company of his loved ones at home, and his sumptuous way of life, he chose instead to suffer affliction with the Christians of Palestine for the name of Christ and due regard for his life-giving tomb. Thus he preferred a foreign land to his own and never slackened his rapid pace at long distances, the grievous way, and the dangers posed by the foreign nations through which he had to pass. Neither did the scant water and the measured bread, which had to be purchased and which proved, in some places, to be noxious, deter him from his purpose, nor did the thronging of the children about him and the tearful embraces and last farewells confound or enfeeble his soul; following the example of the Apostle Paul, he did not count his life dear unto himself but pressed forward, even to die for the name of Christ. Thus the man's zeal was apostolic, his purpose dear to God and his achievement beyond perfection. Those who lift their minds to the higher life as loftily expressed in the gospels and strive earnestly to attain it ignore mundane cares as so much refuse. He, I am convinced of it, had a happy end.

(416–417)¹¹

This long eulogy is very rare in Niketas' history. The reason for quoting the paragraph in full is to indicate the reasons Niketas praises him, and virtually all of this is about Frederick's piety. There is nothing about his skill in ruling, his wisdom, his mercy or generosity. Nothing either about his military skill or bravery. Everything is how he gave up a life of luxury to fight for Christ. This, above all, would seem to be what is lacking in the Byzantine emperors. When Manuel goes mad at the end of his life, according to Niketas at least, his madness takes the form of heresy (219–220).

Andronikos Kontostephanos

Andronikos Kontostephanos, who is Manuel's nephew, is mentioned without direct criticism.¹² What we see him doing is thinking for himself, which eventually leads to his blinding. He is a successful general and Manuel recognized him as such and appointed him commander in chief

of all his forces in the war against the Hungarians (152). Kontostephanos prepared his troops for battle, only to receive a letter from the emperor at the last moment telling him to delay the battle to another, luckier day. The general ignored the letter but was successful against the Hungarians. Niketas comments:

That particular day was rejected as being unlucky and unfavourable for a military encounter, but since the successful completion or failure of great and mighty deeds depends on the goodwill of God, I do not know how it was that Manuel could put his trust in the conjunctions and positions and movements of the stars, and obey the prattle of astrologers as though they were equal to judgements coming from God's throne.

(154)

It would seem that Kontostephanos was right to ignore this last-minute command, proving the astrologers wrong, but nevertheless it is a little odd for someone to be praised for disobedience. Yet it is hard not to see Niketas' depiction as reflecting well on the general. He observes after the battle that the Hungarians had been defeated by superior generalship and that the emperor gave thanks to God for the glorious victory (157).

It is also worth observing that Kontostephanos is given a direct speech, unlike Manuel whose words Niketas paraphrased (152). Kontostephanos' words appeal to the soldiers' honour and duty (154–155); the emperor on the other hand had promised them gifts. Kontostephanos reassures his men that they are superior to the Hungarians, whom he called barbarians, and that they had beaten them before.¹³ He ends his speech saying that they must not disappoint the emperor. He says the emperor had sent them out and expects victory and that they had all sworn oaths to fight bravely. He uses the first person plural here including himself, and yet as he speaks he is in the process of disobeying an imperial order (154–155).

He was then sent by Manuel to Egypt (160). Again he was countermanded by those higher up than he. Manuel had told him to cooperate with Amalric, king of Jerusalem, but the latter did not have the same commitment to cooperation (161–162). In frustration, Kontostephanos decided to take action by himself, and again Niketas gave him another direct speech. The general condemned Amalric forthrightly, accusing him of treachery, and he urged his men to leave all thoughts of working with the westerners and to follow him against the enemy. This time the engagement is a disaster for the Romans who are forced to retreat (167–168).

This second speech is longer than the first – largely it is an attack on their Latin allies (164–166). Niketas had introduced it by saying:

So Andronikos gave up talking into the ear of the dead. In disgust he stripped himself of the Latin drivel¹⁴ and decided to conduct the campaign on his own.

(164)

Amalric is portrayed as behaving exactly as Kontostephanos describes in the speech, so the general is depicted as understanding the reality of the situation and therefore the reader appreciates that he is a sensible character. The Romans are not successful, but Niketas shows the general as in an impossible situation and doing the best he could in those circumstances.

Later we read about Kontostephanos at Myriokephalon being shocked that the emperor was contemplating flight, but it was an ordinary soldier's words that stung the emperor into abandoning that (187). Indeed this episode might indicate that Kontostephanos is Niketas' source at this point, and therefore not impossible that he provided him with information about other incidents, such as what happened in Egypt.¹⁵ Niketas writes that the emperor's talk of secret flight:

shocked his listeners, especially Kontostephanos, as words spoken by one who had lost his senses or was whirling about because of dizziness.

(187)

Singling Kontostephanos out for this very personal conversation would seem to indicate that he is the source. It reflects very badly on the emperor.

Later when narrating the reign of Alexios Porphyrogenetos, Niketas reports that it was the defection of Andronikos Kontostephanos with all the Roman long ships to the future emperor Andronikos that really helped the latter, and made the protosebastos despair (248). Niketas comments at the end of this paragraph, which sees the usurper Andronikos safe at last, that although his supporters rejoiced at his success, some recognized that he was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Kontostephanos later turned against Andronikos and formed a conspiracy to kill him, but it is discovered and Kontostephanos is blinded (266–267).

Was Kontostephanos one of Niketas' flawless heroes? He is depicted as a good and effective general, but there are very few words of direct praise. We see that he clearly had a good reputation as a military leader, which is why his defection harmed the protosebastos, and helped the usurper and he had enough authority that those in his command followed him. He plotted to kill Andronikos, which is not a black mark given the terrible

description Niketas gives of this emperor. In whatever way the reader judges his actions, we do not actually have many words by Niketas that point to unequivocal hero status.

Conrad of Montferrat

When the readers are introduced to Conrad of Montferrat, who was also the cousin of Frederick Barbarossa, they learn that he was

comely and in the bloom of youth, brave and prudent beyond measure,
and flourishing in vigour and bodily strength.

(201)¹⁶

One might say that one reason Niketas gives more details about the westerners is because they would have been less familiar to the readers than their Roman counterparts. As Angeliki Laiou observes:

Furthermore, writing as he was in difficult times, he [Niketas] often presents the Byzantines, or at least, the inhabitants of Constantinople and their rulers, in a worse light than he does foreigners. Indeed, sometimes the foreigner serves, as he had for Tacitus, for an adverse commentary on contemporary mores: a mirror through which the Byzantines could view their decline.¹⁷

Here there is no doubt that Niketas wants to give a favourable depiction of Conrad. The young man was successful against the emperor's (Manuel's) enemy the bishop of Mainz who was taken prisoner after this encounter (201). We meet Conrad in the reign of Isaakios when he married Isaakios' sister (382–383). Originally the envoys wanted to ask Boniface to marry her but he had just got married, and Conrad's wife had just died. Niketas adds:

the envoys deemed this a godsend and their second choice far superior
to their first.

(382)

The emperor had Branas' rebellion to deal with, but his response was to pray that it would end (383). Conrad, on the other hand, kept prodding him to do something and he himself drew up support for Isaakios. Niketas comments:

Such was the zeal that Conrad demonstrated on behalf of the emperor that he was deemed by all a blessing sent by God (θεόπεμπτον ἄγαθόν) to the emperor in time of need.

(384)

Niketas also describes him rebuking the emperor for his inactivity and the emperor blushing (384). When the emperor's men met Branas' troops in battle, Niketas describes what Conrad is wearing in some detail: he had no shield and instead of a coat of mail he wore

a woven linen fabric that had been steeped in a strong brine of wine and folded many times. So hard and compact had it become from the salt and the wine that it was impervious to all missiles; the folds of the woven stuff numbered more than eighteen.

(386)

A few lines later we learn Conrad was not wearing a helmet either. Conrad's troops routed those of Branas. Branas attacked Conrad but only grazed him, whereas Conrad knocked him off his horse.

They say that when Branas was first wounded by Conrad, he was terrified of death and so pleaded to be spared. Conrad replied that he must not be afraid; he assured him that nothing more unpleasant would happen than that his head should be cut off, and forthwith it was done.

(387)

So there is no doubt here that Conrad is a hero. He is good-looking, brave and resourceful and he helped Isaakios rid himself of Branas.

The emperor is not portrayed in a good light before or after the rebellion. Niketas relates that the emperor gave permission to citizens and foreigners to maltreat the peasants living outside the city, in order to punish them for having helped Branas. Niketas then reports the horrors committed, and we are told that Conrad's troops went out to plunder, but when the emperor put a stop to it, the Constantinopolitans then turned on the Latins (391–392). Eventually order is restored in the city, but the disturbance showed the resentment towards the westerners.

The last mention of Conrad is the most puzzling after all the above. Niketas tells us that he was not happy with the honour accorded to him after all his help to the emperor. This would seem reasonable enough and the way Niketas had portrayed both him and Isaakios would lead the reader to suppose that he is on Conrad's side here. But what he says is:

Conrad was openly displeased that the emperor showed him favours he considered unbefitting his family status and not harmonious with his imperial marital connection and was unhappy that all his proud hopes resulted only in his wearing the buskins of uniform colour that are given but to a few (I speak of the insignia of the kaisars).

(395)

The position of kaisar which he had, because he had married the emperor's sister, was significant. This was an office of great importance and rarely given to foreigners. It effectively made him fourth in the empire after the emperor, but it would seem that Conrad expected more.¹⁸ One might assume that Niketas agreed with him but he does say that the buskins were only given to a few people, emphasizing the honour.

Niketas then has a short paragraph narrating how Conrad sailed off to Palestine and what happened to him and his colleagues.

But it was ordained that they should suffer evil fortune in those parts: many excellent and brave generals who had voluntarily undertaken the journey at their own expense, for Christ's sake, were lost and Conrad himself, who had won the admiration of the Agarenes for his bravery and prudence, survived but a short time before he was slain by an Assassin.

(217/395)

The tone is positive, but the fact that they are killed so quickly throws some doubt in the reader's mind about the rightness of their action.

Notes

- 1 Magdalino 1993:15.
- 2 Magdalino 1993:14.
- 3 Magdalino 1993:13.
- 4 The account of John's reign is one of the shortest, only 22 pages of translation covering 24 years. The only reigns that receive less attention are those of Isaak and Alexios the younger, who are written about in eight pages, and Doukas, whose reign takes up nine pages, but their reigns only lasted 6 months and 2 months, respectively.
- 5 Βλακευόμενος which could actually mean he was more lazy than stupid.
- 6 Similar in some sense to the opinions put in the minds of the Vlachs about the Angeloi dynasty (436–437).
- 7 Prosuch or Borsuq was a Turk in the service of the emperor. See Moravcsik Byz vol. 2 p. 257 [from n 132 of Magoulias, p. 375]. So this is another Turk who is represented in a favourable light by Niketas because in this incident he saves the day.
- 8 Δολοφροσύνας.
- 9 φιλέτερα γὰρ ὑπὲρ τοὺς ὁμογενεῖς ἡ ἀλήθεια This sentiment is discussed at greater length in Chapter 1.
- 10 Angold 1997:281–282.
- 11 Niketas' praise is noted by Laiou 1991:84.
- 12 His mother was Anna Komnena who was the daughter of the emperor John II Komnenos and sister of Manuel I.
- 13 Laiou 1991:79 comments on this in her discussion about Niketas.
- 14 κόρυζα is the word for drivel, Liddell and Scott. Its primary meaning is 'snot' and it comes to mean 'stupidity' or 'driveling'.
- 15 Maisano 1994a:402–403, Simpson 2013:209, 243–244.
- 16 καλὸν ὄντα ἰδεῖν καὶ τὴν ὥραν εὐπρεπῆ, ἀνδρείας τε καὶ συνέσεως ἐς ὅτι κράτιστον καὶ ἀκρότατον ἦκοντα καὶ ἀκμάζοντα ῥώμῃ σώματος. Conrad's brother

Boniface was the leader of the Fourth Crusade. The ‘flawless westerners’ are related to each other – Conrad III was the uncle of Frederick Barbarossa and Conrad of Montferat’s mother’s halfbrother was Conrad III, so Conrad was Frederick’s cousin.

17 Laiou 1991:78–79.

18 Before Alexios I, the kaisar had been the second in command to the emperor, but Alexios had created the position of sebastokrator which then made a kaisar only third in the empire. Manuel created the title of despotes so when Conrad was kaisar that gave him a position of fourth place after the emperor. See Magdalino 1993:181–184.

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